Enchanting World of Infants

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K.L. CHOWDHURY

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With compliments

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For my Grandchildren
Nausheen, Aditya and Shereen,
who taught me to sing the love songs of childhood again.

By the same author:

- *Of Gods, Men and Militants,* 2000.
- *A Thousand-Petalled Garland and Other Poems,* 2003.

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- My daughters, Anita and Renuka and their spouses, Rajive and Sidarth, have gone through most of the poems while I was with them in USA or after I e-mailed them when I was in India soon after they were composed. I could not have gone on without their encouragement and appreciation.
- 'In You We Seek Our Permanence' has appeared in South Asian Review of December 2005
- The series of poems 'After You Left' have appeared in Indian Literature, Volume 235, Sept.-Oct. 2006. The last poem in this series is by my daughter, Renuka.
- 'I Am Going to Miss You' is by my granddaughter, Nausheen. She wrote it on the eve of her departure from India.
- The last stanza of the poem 'On Going to Bed-1' is by my grandson, Aditya.

Contents

Acknowledgements vii
Introduction xv
Love Song of Childhood xix

Section One : Invocation 1-7
A New Star in the Firmament 3
The Promised One 5
New Paradigm of Life 7

Section Two : Conception 9-27
You Announce Your Arrival 11
Sighting You for the First Time 12
Speaking through Your Heart 15
Time Encapsulated 16
A New Lease 17
Making Your Presence Felt 19
She Plays to Rules 21
Virtual Reality 23
We Wait Patiently 25

Section Three : Creation 29-92
Creation 31
Nausheen 35
Stirring Visions 37

In You We Seek Our Permanence 39

The Sleep Sequence 41

Straight in the Eye 44

No Perfumes for My Child 45

Making Up for your Absence 47

Diaper Rash 49

Mittens 51

Mother's Vigil 53

Lullaby 55

Unblinking 56

Attaining Motherhood 58

Let Tears Flow 60

Revealed in a New Light 61

Time for the Morning Walk 63

Meeting Great-grandma First Time 65

Mother how You Fuss Over Me 67

Kangaroo 69

Flesh and Blood Kid 71

You are My Time 73

Let there be Light 76

Thumb-Sucking 77

Learning to Crawl 78

She Fights Sleep 81

She is Everywhere 83

Yashoda 85

The Prospect of Returning to Day Care 87

Let Me Use My Hands and Feet 89
Surrender to Her 91

Section Four : The One Year Milestone 93-131
One Year Progress Report 95
No Sloppy Diets, Please 100
Creating Space 101
Time to Wake Up—1 102
Time to Wake Up—2 103
Dandelion 105
Beyond the First Year 107
On the Run 109
The Stairs 111
He is No Ordinary Kid 113
Brave Kid 115
Siva is back 116
Mine Alone 120
A Dad's Plea 122
Everything at its Time 124
When I Look at Your Picture 127
You Grow into Our Consciousness, Shereen 129

Section Five : The Two Year Milestone 133-162
A Day in the Life of a Two Year Old 135
Playmates—1 143
Playmates—2 144
The Helpmate—1 145
The Helpmate—2 146

More at Two 147
Meeting You after a Year 149
The Great Mimic 151
Sibling Rivalry 153
At Two and a Half 155
Aditya on His First Visit to India 158
The Prophet 159
How We Miss Him—1 160
How We Miss Him—2 162

Section Six : Third Year and After 163-190

Happy 3rd Birthday 165
Why Can't I Stay Home, Mother? 166
She is a Big Girl 168
On Going to Bed—1 170
On Going to Bed—2 172
Love is There 173
The Right Intonation 174
Broken Heart and a Rainbow Flower 176
Bravado 178
So Many Names 180
Shereen Postures on Didi's Birthday 182
The Cosmic Kids Meet—1 185
The Cosmic Kids Meet—2 187
The Cosmic Kids Meet—3 189

Section Seven : Bird Songs for Infants 191-205

Chirrup Bulbul, Chirrup 193

Crow Poornima 195
Clever Crow—1 197
Clever Crow—2 199
The Kingfisher's Dilemma 203

Section Eight : Grandchildren Visit Grandparents in India 207-219

Waiting to be Picked 209
The Final Hours 211
I am Going to Miss You 212
After You Left 1-10 213

Introduction

The world of infants is at once physical and metaphysical. The fusion of the immanent and the transcendental, the human and the divine, makes this world an irresistible realm of enchantment and fantasy, dream and fact.

Charming little angels as they are, infants are the embodiment of a global human oneness . Yet, each one of them is different and each has a distinct personality right from birth, nay, even while they are conceived. And before they sprout in their mothers' wombs to begin that fabulous nine-month intra-natal course, they are differently envisioned in the minds of their parents and grandparents and in that of the Creator. They behave differently and invoke different feelings in their parents even in their embryonic and foetal stages—each enchanting in its own way. From conception to birth, expectation and enchantment encapsulate the infant's arrival in the world of adults.

Each infant has a chequered course right since that stupendous moment of migration from the quiet sanctuary of the inner cosmos in the mother's womb to the outer cosmos, undertaking heroically the first challenge of the maiden breath after birth—the inaugural step of an uncharted terrestrial journey across the uneven terrain of human existence. And then the trials and tribulations—the feeding and sleeping, the bibs and diapers, the cribs and cots, the vibrators and bouncers, the prams and strollers, the toys and dolls, the visits to the doctors, the coughs and colds, the runny noses and funny tummies, and the daily, monthly and yearly milestones—as they sportingly ride over the vicissitudes—learning to sit, crawl and walk, to be part of the family and to communicate in so many ways, creating a brave new world around them with their insatiable desire for independence and exploration, their amazing skills and learning capabilities, their imagination and creativity, their anxieties and fears. There is a mystique, a magical aura about this unique infant world, which seeks expression in so many ways.

What do they think about themselves and the cosmos they create around them, these infants—pure and innocent, unselfish and ingenuous, generous and loving, engaging and enchanting? What are their feelings, what do they dream about and what would they speak in case the embryos and foetuses and infants in the formative years could do so, or after they actually speak the first words? What passes through the minds of parents and grandparents—their thoughts and feelings, their fears and hopes—about their growing infants as they go about their parenting and grand-parenting roles? A cumulative creative compendium of this enchanting world of the infant is what I have attempted to pen down in the poems of this anthology.

The poems in this collection have been inspired by the birth of our grandchildren in USA where our two daughters immigrated after their marriage. My wife, Leela, and I managed to visit them from India from time to time, being physically present at the time of the birth of each grandchild, a few weeks before and after. But our communication channels—through letters, e-mails and phone calls—remained alive even when we were away, and the rest was dreaming and desiring, insight and imagination. It has been an undivided attention and adoration for these infants. In the process we have been blessed many times over. We have rediscovered the infant world of our own daughters, part of which had escaped us during our busy lives when we were in our parenting roles. We have discovered the beautiful world of our grandchildren—their innocence, their divinity, their universality, their deep sagacity. We have drunk the abundant nectar of their love, and savoured the rapturous joy of their hypnotic charm.

Since each of our three grandchildren have, at one time or the other, provided the backdrop and the inspiration for these poems, they are accordingly referred to either by their names or the gender (he or she) in some of the poems. The poems are arranged according to the chronological and functional age to which they belong and not the dates when they have been written. They have been grouped into sections highlighting milestones. Of course, this is an arbitrary division because days, months and years coalesce in human existence into one imperceptible whole. Most of the poems are in the first person of the foetus/infant, the parents and grandparents. A few of them are in the second and third person as well, giving the entire work a diversified poetic narrative.

There is no attempt at didacticism, nor any desire to impart lessons in parenting or grand-parenting.

15th January, 2007 Kundan Lal Chowdhury

Love Song of Childhood

Let us play childhood,
let us play love,
let us soar together,
to the heavens above.

Let us rock in the cradle,
let us roll in the pram,
let us row in the boat,
let us ride on the tram.

Let us hail the spring,
let us swing in the breeze,
let us watch the flowers,
let us climb the trees.

Let us cross the Vitasta,
let us swim in the Dal,
let us dance at Nishat,
let us sail to Manasbal.

Let us play peek-a-boo,
let us play shells,
let us play butter-thief,
let us play marbles.

Let us read fairy tales,
let us sing merry rhymes,
let us paint with crayons,
let's strike temple chimes.

Let us scale the hills,
let us ramble in the valleys,
let us play the flute,
let us dance with the gopis.

Let us sing childhood,
let us sing love,
let us together discover,
childhood's treasure trove.

Vitasta—a river flowing through the Kashmir valley.

Nishat—a lovely garden on the banks of the Dal, the famous lake of Srinagar.

Manasbal—a natural lake 20 miles north of Srinagar in Kashmir.

Butter thief—the infant Krishna (Hindu god) who loves to tease the milkmaids, stealing butter from them.

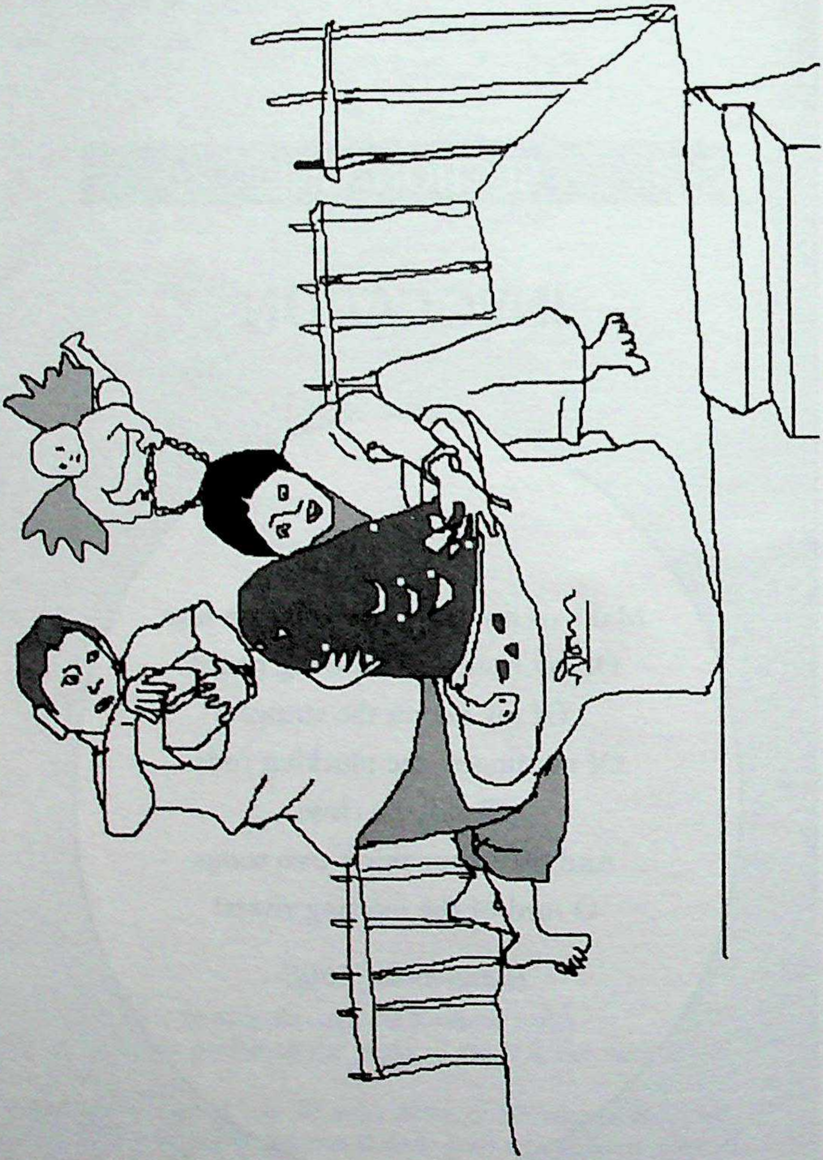
Gopis.—belles of Gokul who loved to dance with Krishna and hear the mesmerising notes of his flute.

SECTION ONE

INVOCATION

Make of my body the reed of a lute
Of my head the sounding gourd
Of my nerves the strings
Of my fingers the plucking rods.
Clutch me close
And play your thirty two songs
O lord of the meeting rivers!

(Basavanna [500])



A New Star in the Firmament

Come what may
we never lost a day
visiting our faith's temple
up the Roopnagar hill.

We lay prostrate in obeisance
in the benevolent Lord's presence;
we bathed him in the milk of our love,
and offered flowers and incense;
we washed and mopped the sacred floors,
and discharged many a religious chores;
we tolled the bells, large and small,
and performed parikramas, one and all;
we sang the hymn
'Shantakaram Bujagashynum...,'
and chanted the mantra
'Om Bhoor Bhuvasah...;'
we walked the winding path of penance
and sat in meditation and in trance;
we chose august company,
of the wise, the initiated and the holy;
we prayed to the gods—Indra, and Agni,
Rudra, Suriya, Chandrama and Prithvi;
we invoked the elements in Nature—
the earth, the fire, the air, the water;
we raised our hands in supplication
to the mighty god of creation.

And patiently we waited,
hearts fluttering, breaths bated;
gazing at the endless heavens
for a cosmic occurrence;

scanning the galaxies and the milky way,
for that miracle to happen one day—
a new star in the firmament,
our life's wish-fulfilment.

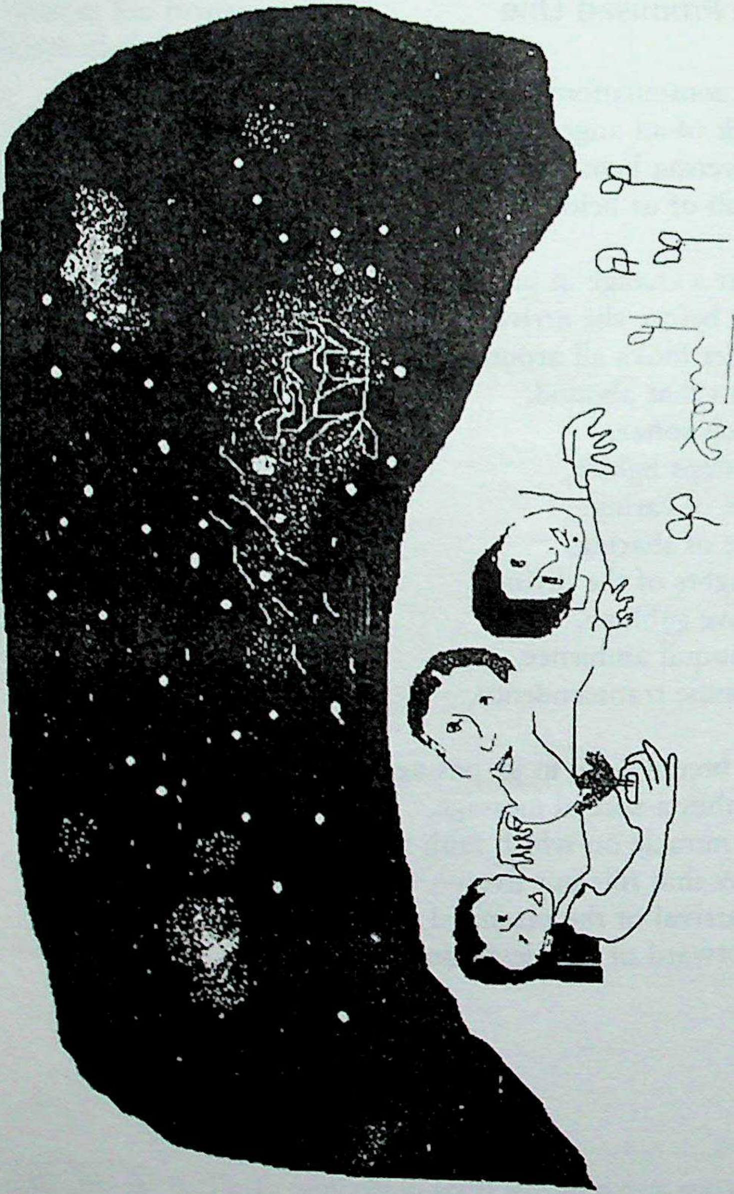
Lord—Lord Siva (of the Hindu pantheon of gods) receives a bath every day with water and milk.
Parikramas—circumambulations around a deity or a temple.

The Promised One

The constellations in the sky
speak of an angel on the way
showering light and love
for all of us below.

What a change in our lives
even before she arrives!
Kinder looks all around,
smiles that abound,
speech softer,
footsteps lighter,
more of caring,
more of sharing,
thoughts of the divine,
of love sublime,
a tranquil ambience,
a cosmic transcendence.

The breeze here, in its passage,
breathes a special message,
of a miracle on which faith survives,
of joy that fills our lives—
the arrival of the promised one,
the reward of our devotion.



New Paradigm of Life

Let us blend genes with genes—
those magic skeins,
the encrypted secrets of life—
and pass our lineage on
from generation
to generation.

Let us draw bold outlines
on the vast canvas of life
crossing new horizons,
weaving new mosaics,
splashing new colours,
creating new visions,
sculpting new destinies,
writing a new future of mankind.

Let us celebrate life
by creating life.

SECTION TWO

CONCEPTION

The craving of the child in the womb
is reflected in the mother's face;
love is etched where it belongs.

(Tukaram)

You Announce Your Arrival

When I recalled your promise
from the memory of earlier lives
to be born as my offspring
again and again,
I wondered
how long I would have to wait,
fasting, worshipping, observing vows,
listening patiently to doctor and saint,
and praying fervently with folded hands
for you to re-incarnate.

Waiting patiently
for what looked like an eternity
I hardly realised
that I was blessed
and you had quietly settled
here inside me,
till those tell-tale signs—
the changing moods,
the gentle twinges of sweet pain,
an appetite playing hide and seek,
a desire to rest and to sleep,
and so many dreams of my little one—
caught up with me
and proudly announced your arrival.

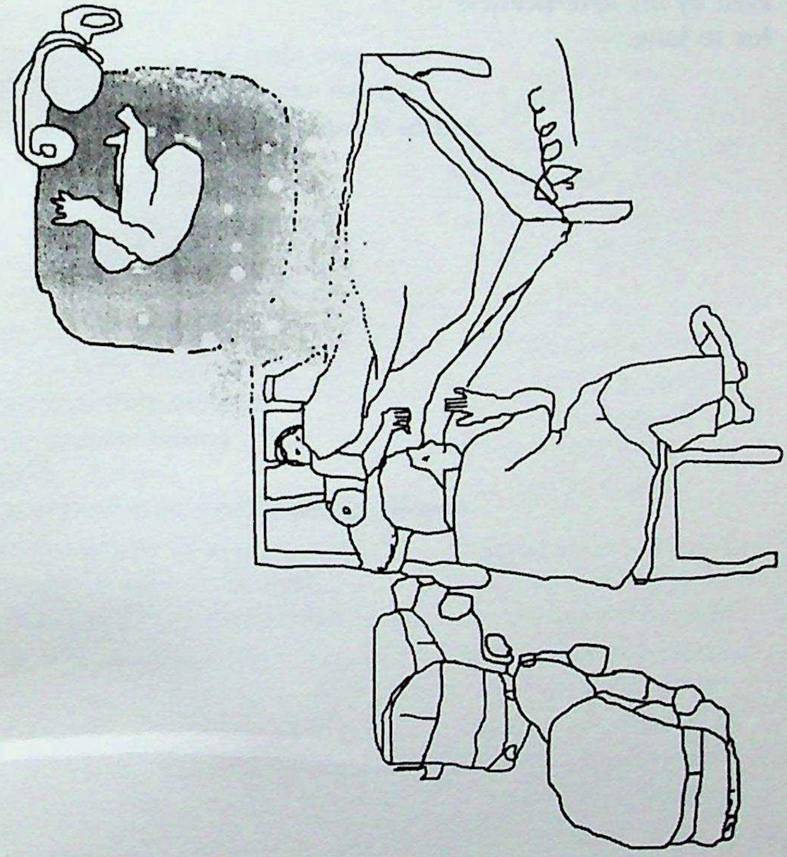
Sighting You for the First Time

You were only a vision,
a desire to grasp and see,
a beautiful thought,
a symphony,
a fragrance out of the ordinary,
a touch of eternity.

Then I saw you first time,
on the ultrasonic screen,
face to face,
embedded within myself,
lying deep within me
in quiet repose.

Your eyes would not open
from deep meditation.
Unseeing, yet feeling my eyes on you,
at the first sign of recognition
of your mother,
was it your little finger
that you raised, my loved one,
and awakened the world for me
in its entirety?

And soon after,
when you pantomimed,
'Hello ma, it is me,
feeling so cosy;
pray bear with me a little longer
and I will be right there
in your lap,
in flesh and blood,'



it made me wonder
why I was all along unaware
even while you were charting
miles and miles
right here, inside my womb,
not to be betrayed
even by my love-sickness
for so long.

Speaking through Your Heart

While you made your presence felt
in so many ways
I kept wondering, my little one,
how you would accost your mother
the first time you decide to speak to her.

I debated with myself
what address you would use,
what words choose,
only to discover
on the foetal monitor*
that you were waiting
for a propitious moment
and a singular means
to speak to me—
much earlier than speech would allow—
direct from your heart,
beating in unison with mine,
pounding with the excitement
of the first communion!

---

*Foetal monitor—a device that records heart beats of the foetus

Time Encapsulated

Was Time ever made captive
as when I conceived you,
my little angel,
and made use
of every infinitesimal second
in shaping you, my darling,
from the primordial egg
to the merry embryo
to a vibrant foetus?

I weave at my will,
every waking moment
and every sleeping wink,
the pattern of time
into matter and space,
to give you form.

Time is in my grasp,
Time is at my command,
Time is encapsulated within me,
Time is incarnate in my offspring.
My blood waters the seed of Time
to bring it to fruition
and make the miracle of life
possible within me.

A New Lease

As the incoming car struck ours,
I let go the steering wheel
in a lightning flash
and crouched forward reflexly,
my both hands on my tummy.

Who knows how the car stopped
and when the police arrived
to cut open its roof
and pull us out
and carry us to the hospital,
dumbfounded with shock.

My palms were still crossed on you
till I was roused from the nightmare
when the doctors separated them
to find out how you were,
and I saw you once again,
on the ultrasonic screen,
your hand raised up
in a stop-signal to the other car
just as it was jamming into ours!

Pray who was protecting whom,
my little one?
Who brought about the miracle
by which both of us
escaped unscathed?
Who made that second coming to life
possible for both of us?

Was it me
trying to insulate you

with my hands,
or your mystical deed
even while you are
just a tiny seed
embedded in me?

Making Your Presence Felt

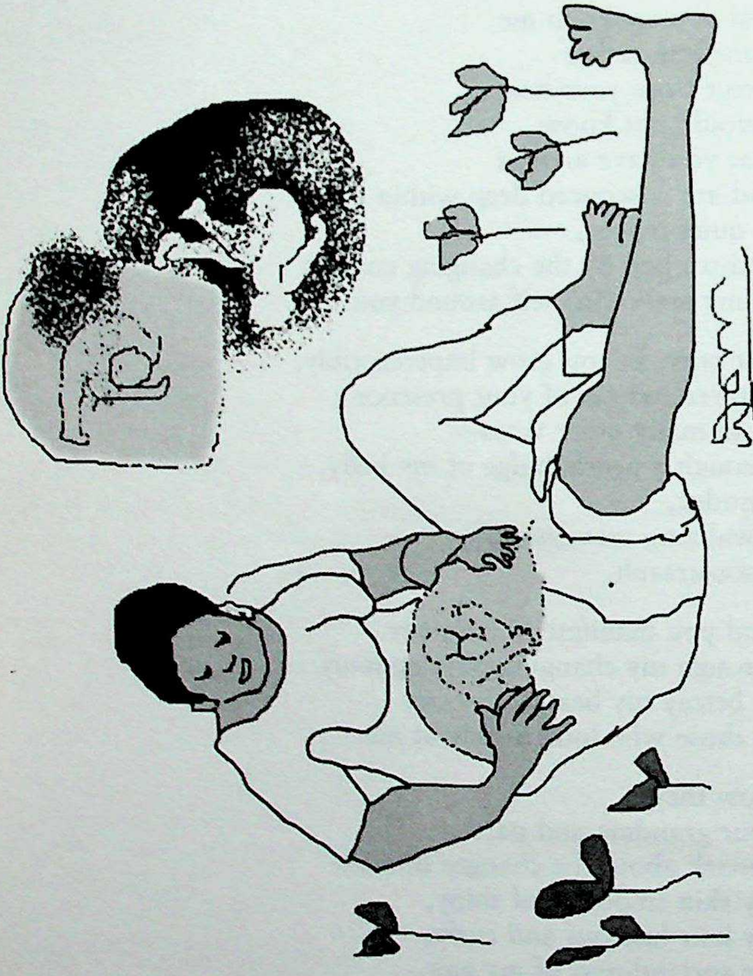
Except for that maternal instinct
and for the fact
that you spoke to me
sometime earlier
direct from your heart,
I would not know
that you have arrived
and are ensconced deep within me
in quiet repose,
undisturbed by the changing cosmos
of my embodied self around you.

But now, as you grow imperceptibly,
you remind me of your presence
in so many other ways—
through a gentle bulge of my belly,
a nudge,
a waltzing movement,
a somersault.

And you manifest so uniquely
through my changing physiognomy
to betray my beautiful secret
to those who look keenly at me.

Now they,
your grandma and pa,
remark about the changes in me—
my skin smooth and shiny,
my hair lustrous and curly,
the sprightliness of my gait,
the timbre in my voice,
and an impatience in my looks.

They see a twinkle in my eyes,
and hear a voice within my voice.



She Plays to Rules

My darling sylph,
while you are there within me
I don't mind
how you move and turn,
assume positions at will,
and pirouette so freely
or dance
a Natyam or Kathakali.

But when you choose
to be sleepy and at rest
just when the doctors conduct
the non-stress test,
you give them a chance
you could do without,
to use their stingers
and move you about.

And when the other day
you decided, my dear,
to assume the Buddha posture
and give us a scare
I somehow knew
that it was a little trick,
a test of nerves
for the intrepid doctor,
for, when he was about to manoeuvre
a version on the appointed hour,
you righted yourself, unheard, unseen,
before he could intervene.

It was a feat that did me proud
and I can not wait to kiss you aloud.

Natyam and Kathakali—Indian classical dances.
Non-stress test—a routine test for assessing the foetal movements.
Stingers—used to stimulate a quiet foetus to ascertain movements.
Buddha posture—head-up position, which is reverse of the normal head-down position of a foetus in the womb.
Version—manoeuvre to correct the position of the foetus in a faulty lie.

Virtual Reality

It was a beautiful summer day,
our very first
on our visit
to our daughter in USA.

No sooner I opened the door
in my impatience to saunter out
for my first morning stroll
than the deafening burglar alarm,
like thunder in a cloudless sky,
tore the morning peace apart,
catching the household unawares.

Grandma-to-be,
nursing the jet lag of an overseas journey,
trooped down
and eyeing me rather sternly,
blamed my naivete
for shattering the tranquillity,
and for having woken up everybody
on this quiet spring Sunday morn.

Dad-in-the-making
awoke, disturbed and distraught,
from a well-deserved draught
of week-end sleep,
looking at me inquiringly,
searching frantically
for the button on the control panel,
to stop the screeching siren.

Fearing we would be besieged shortly
by beeping vans and the police party,

and feeling so guilty
for causing anguish all around,
my arms rose up helplessly
and words came to me so scarcely
to say that I was sorry.

But mom-in-expectancy,
softly gliding out of her bed room,
informed us reassuringly
that she had phoned the security
about the faux pas
and there was no need to alarm,
and we should all take it easy.

And then I thought
I could distinctly hear
my yet-to-be-born grandchild
speaking to me affectionately:
'Grandpa, pray feel not guilty
for I am insulated fully,
against all hoots and toots,
inside my mom's belly.
Don't you see,
in this great country,
it is technology
that sets the calendar,
that dictates the tone and tenor
of existence for everybody,
even the gestational march
from conception to delivery.

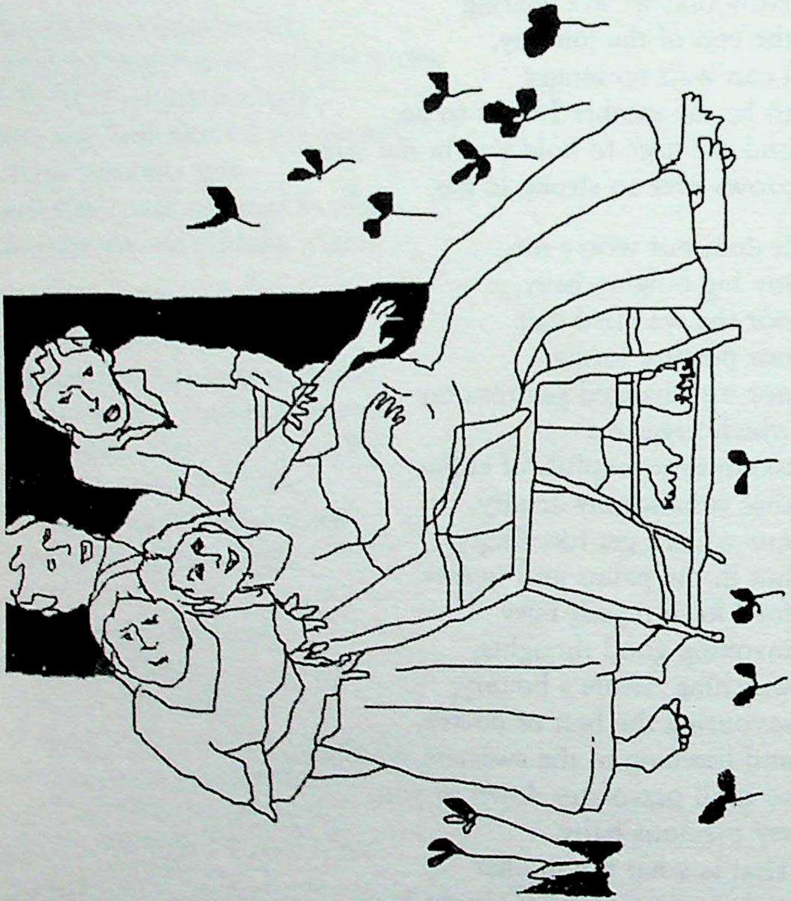
'Oh this virtual reality
that has seized humanity!'

We Wait Patiently

Now that we are nearing
the end of the journey,
I can wait no longer
to be the mother I want to be,
and the urge to hold you in my arms
grows ever so strong in me.

It does not worry me,
my big bulging belly,
nor the waddled gait
nor posture lordly,
nor my changed gastronomy
which urges me
to consume cupfuls of coffee
that enhance my acidity,
nor when I get too sleepy,
hot in the palms and sweaty,
for I keep myself busy
invoking good thoughts,
watching nature's bounty,
savouring the best of poetry,
and listening to the sweetest symphony
so it all percolates down to you,
my precious baby.
That is what my mother
and my grandmother taught me.

Now when it is week forty
and we all wait patiently
for you to materialise
                    in flesh and blood,
you seem to think differently



as you move around freely
in the cosmos of your mother's womb,
learning the lessons of gravity,
preparing for your terrestrial journey.

I have been asked to keep track
in these final days of pregnancy
and watch regularly,
your jiggles and wiggles,
elbows, footsies and somersaults,
and the times when you choose to be
rather quiet, restful and cosy,
and then back again
into a flurry
of acrobatic activity.

There are some who, looking at me,
venture a guess,
that you be a he or a she
but we let that suspense be,
for what is of essence to me,
is that moment of glory
I am waiting for,
when you manifest
at your best.

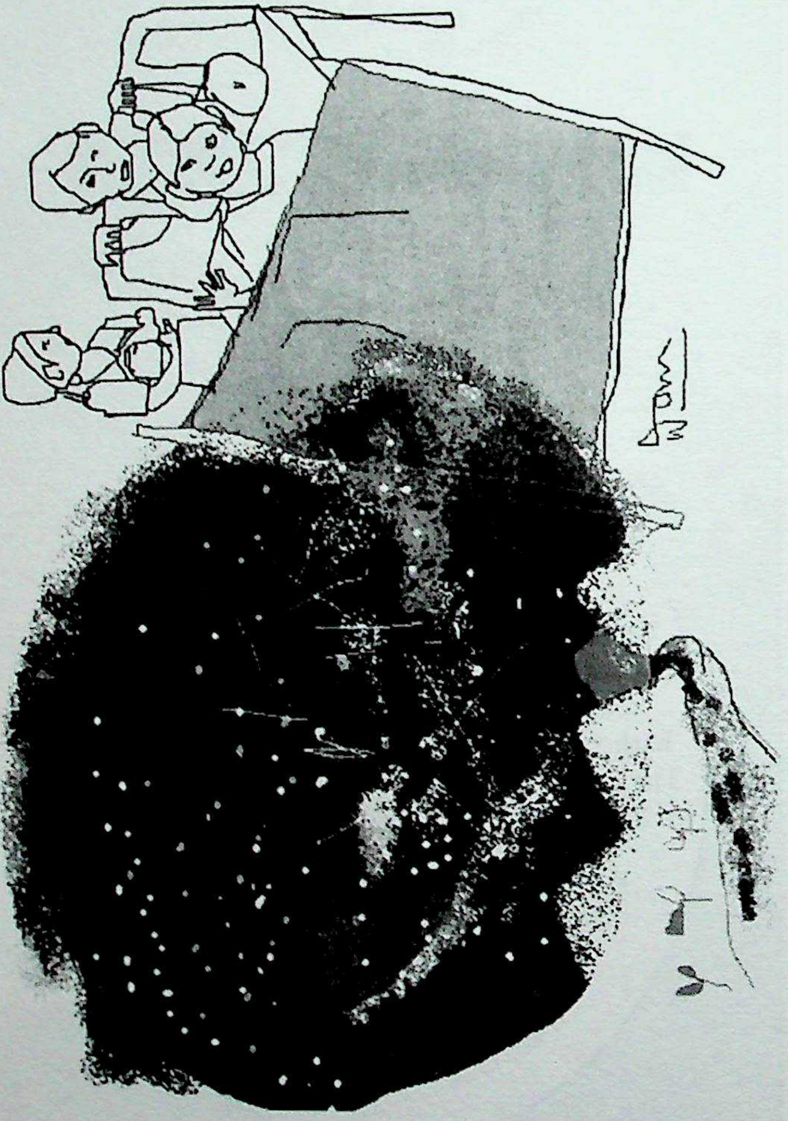
SECTION THREE

CREATION

The light is come, amid all lights the fairest;
born is the brilliant, far-extending brightness.
Night, sent away for Savitar's uprising,
hath yielded up a birthplace for the morning.
The fair, the bright is come with her offspring;
to her the dark one hath resigned her dwelling.

Akin, immortal, following each other,
changing their colours,
both the heavens move forward.

(Rig Veda I.113)



Creation

And then the dams burst
in the middle of night,
the waters broke and gushed out
in a big 'show'—
a prelude to creation—
like the draining of Satisar
by the great Rishi
to give birth to the Valley.

Was it your impatience to emerge
from your nine-month confinement,
and be on your own,
to embark on your existential odyssey
outside the sanctum of my womb,
that you punctured the shield
with your tiny toenail
to tear off the buffer
of sacred water,
that I had thrown around you?

Or was it the tears from my womb
crying at the thought
of your imminent separation,
now that time had arrived,
as it always does
for all of us?

The pains came,
gentle at first,
with rests and pauses,
but growing strong in a crescendo,
riding over each other
like the waves of a sea in storm—

each wave, stronger and more urgent,
eager to meet the shore.

The pangs grew,
coaxing you
through that final phase
of your journey inside of me,
in an attempt to help you out,
so I could behold your cosmic form.

Were we both in such a hurry
to meet face to face,
in flesh and blood,
that, in the impatience
of your headlong journey
it was the brow, and not the occiput,
that presented first,
and got stuck at the portals?

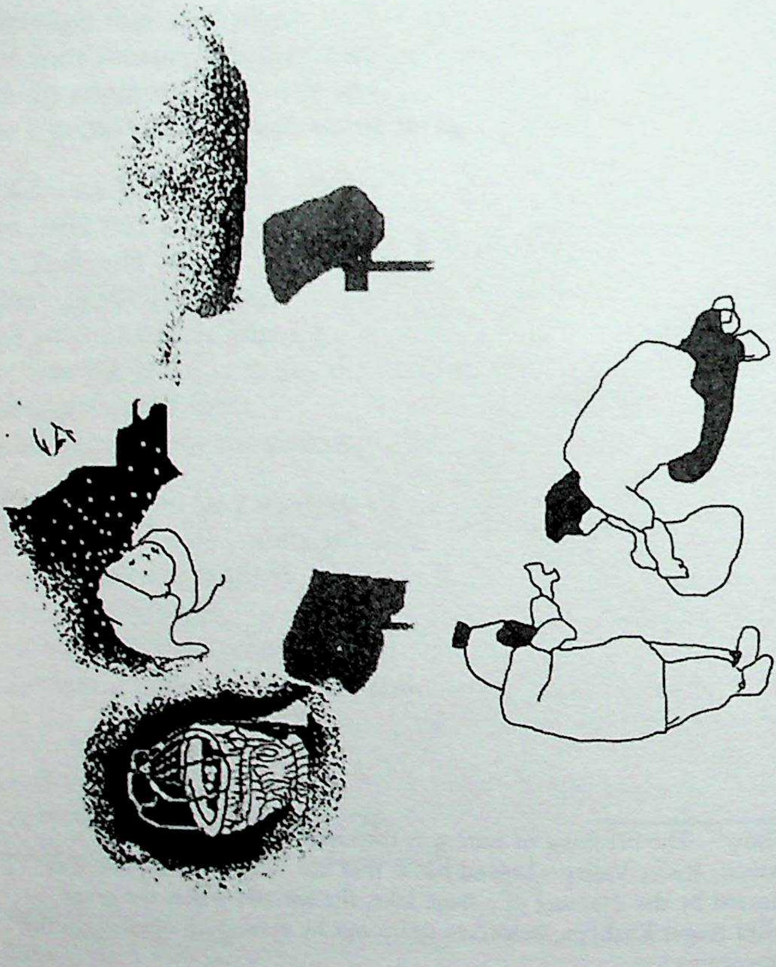
Creation is no easy matter;
joy doesn't come from nowhere;
wishes are not granted
without penance;
when the oceans were churned
the nectar came with the poison.

The moment of the fire test
had arrived for both of us,
as I was rushed to the theatre
to deliver you through a caesarean.

And thus,
you were born—
like the universe,
with a big bang—
in that moment of glory,
through blood and sweat,
through tears and agony,

and it seemed an eternity
before I heard that primal sound
I was waiting for—
your first cry—
and closed my eyes in ecstasy
as I was being stitched up.

'Show'—The breaking of waters at the onset of labour.
Satisar, Rishi, Valley—Legend has it that the Valley of Kashmir was created by the draining of a huge lake, the Satisar, which the great Rishi (sage) Kashypa, helped to drain out by cutting an opening in the mountains.
'Brow' and 'occiput'—It is the crown of the head called the occiput that presents first during a normal delivery. If the head of the infant is slightly tilted backwards, the brow becomes the presenting part, making it a difficult delivery and often an indication for caesarean section.



Nausheen

Nausheen, the new snowfall,
born of the snow-dreams of home—
of cosy huddles and cuddles
in *kangri*-warmed beddings;
of water-chestnuts baked on iron stoves;
of long-boots, *pherons* and pull-down caps;
of fish and beans and rice—
you come to us virginal white,
landing so soft, so quiet
on our withered memories in exile.

Nausheen, the angel from the skies,
you bring the sweet fragrance
of a forgotten winter's delight,
a morning of divine sight,
supernal, serene, white,
soft, smiling, bright.

Nausheen,
you arrive to replenish
the denuded peaks of soul
and to water
the parched marrow of spirit.

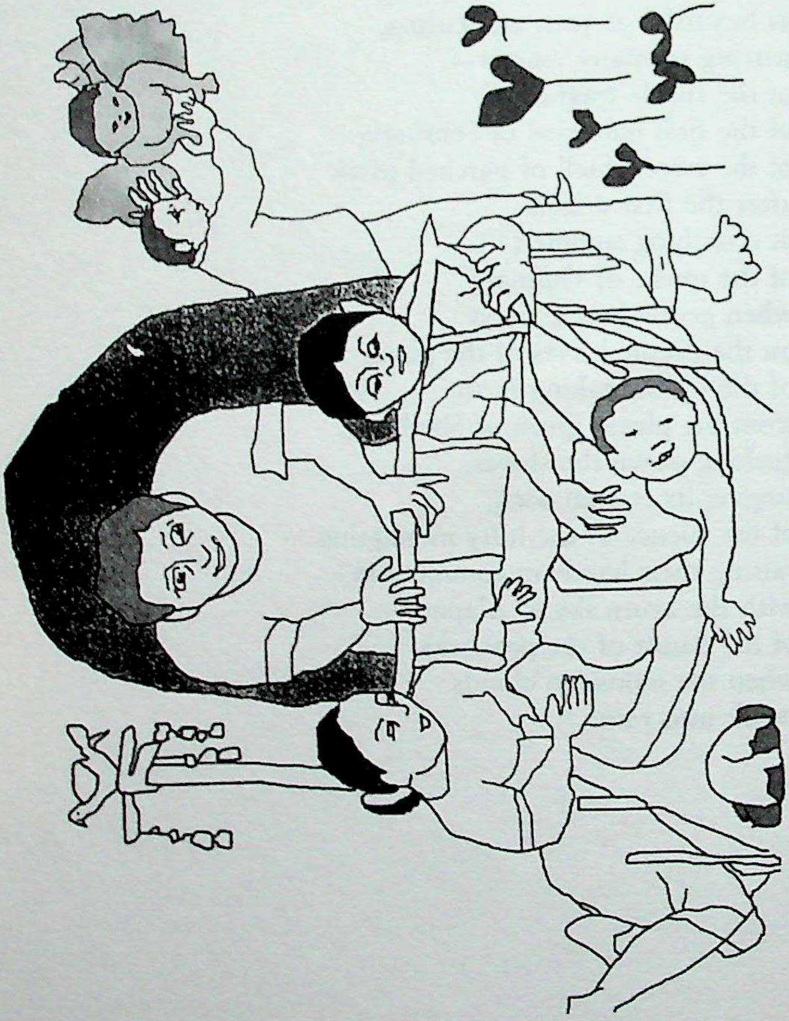
Nausheen,
the offspring of exiled dreams,
born to the children of snow
in snow-less climes,
you come to us—
the promise,
the resurrection and the life,
and the generational thrust

in our march
back to the snowy roots.

Nausheen—Name of the infant; also the new (first) snowfall of the year.
Kangri—A fire-pot with a wickerwork frame used for warming in winter.
Pherons—Long loose woollen robes.

Stirring Visions

I never set my eyes on anything
as beautiful as you, my darling,
stirring so many visions—
of the subtle fragrance
of the first narcissus of February;
of the sweet smell of parched earth
after the first drizzle
in scorching summer;
of the music of Gulmarg
when gentle breeze plays
on the needle leaves of the pines;
of the Lidder taking birth
from the placid green of Sheshnag,
gushing down the slopes,
singing its eternal song;
of the silence of the lofty mountains
raising their hands in communion
with the azure sky in Alapather;
of the dance of the peacocks
when the monsoon clouds
break into rain!



In You We Seek Our Permanence

While you are
hardly a week into the world,
trying to come to grips
outside the quiet repose of mother's womb,
squinting away from lurid lights,
startling at rude sounds,
sneezing now from the manifold smells,
now squirming from brusque contact,
hiccuping a while after a feed
and yawning to return
to the world of dreams;
little angel,
we solicit your indulgence
with such impatience.

While you look us square in the eye
for rapport, recognition and refuge,
keenly we seek in your physiognomy
some of our very own traits—
the shape and size of your slender limbs
the palmer creases, the planter lines,
the downy skin, the dimpled cheeks,
the sharp outline of your rosy mouth,
the contours of the crystalline nose,
the slope of the brow to the crown above,
the colour and texture of the hairs,
the miraculous design of the ears,
the length and curve of your eyelashes,
the arc of the eyebrows, their hair density,
the size of the pupils, the colour of the irises,
the infinite depth of your wondering eyes,

and the seductive charm of your angelic face
when you smile that half smile.

And,
while you endeavour to reach out to us,
to familiarise and to bond
in so many ways,
we search, in your distinctive features,
some of our own attributes;
we ardently seek, in your fragile form,
a scheme,
a hint,
a thought,
of our passage into permanence.

The Sleep Sequence

A fluttering of the lids,
a gentle roving of the eyes,
a searching gaze,
now to the left,
now to the right,
now a squint,
now a skew,
and now a coquettish look,
straight at me—
the iris changing hue,
now looking grey,
now brown,
and now a light blue.

The lids close for a while,
so transparent so light,
only to open again—
now half open, now wide,
and now a flash of vision,
a see-through gaze
that transcends time-space,
looking back in the past
and into the future too!

The breathing staccato,
now fast, now slow,
and now a gentle heave,
now so quiet, so low.

The tongue flicks in and out,
the thin lips purse and pout
and now they gently close

in a kissing pose
and now drawn into cupid's bow,
darting my heart with **Kama's* arrow,
and now opening wide
to reveal the cosmos inside!

A flicker of a finger here,
a twitching of a muscle there,
a yawn,
a wide yawn,
the back arching like a bow,
the limbs stretching far,
the tiny hands, in a dance sequence
coming to rest on the chest,
and now on the face,
fingers spread on the cheek
in a sage-like stance,
in deep thought,
in transcendence!

Heavy with sleep, the lids close,
lightly, in angelic pose,
the fisted hands unfold,
the arms and legs dangle loose,
the breathing shallow
and in harmony,
as sleep takes over—
baby sleep,
dreamy sleep,
angelic sleep—
but soon there is a sigh,
a deep sigh,
a frown,
a grimace on the face,
a sudden startle,
an outcry,
a squeal, as if of pain,

and a stiffening of the limbs again—
"Chasing away
the phantoms of the past,"
grandma explains.

And now another dream?
A flicker of a smile,
a half smile,
and soon a smile
as wide as a mile,
a chuckle,
a short peal of laughter,
and blissful sleep soon after—
"Playing with the fairies,"
grandmother reiterates.

---

*Kama—the god of love.

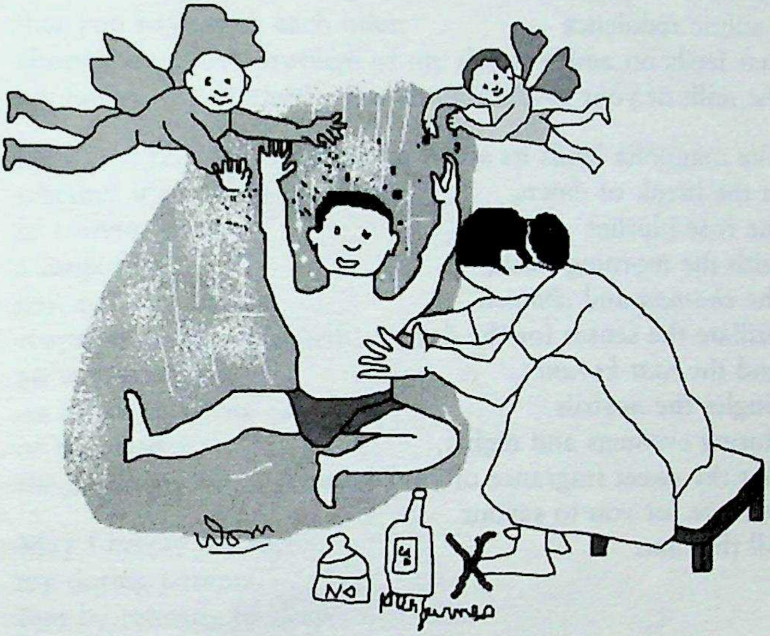
Straight in the Eye

Now lying helplessly in the crib,
looking intently in the distance,
what goes on in your mind,
little baby,
while the family, watching admiringly,
recounts your many attributes?

Now resting delicately
on your mama's brimful breast,
a birdie in her warm nest,
how generously you yield
to your Dad's eager caress
and the soft kisses he lands
on your downy pink feet.

Now ensconced in grandma's lap,
looking her straight in the eye
with that profound magnetic gaze
of genetic recognition,
how you hold her spellbound
in deep communion!

No Perfumes for My Child



Mother,
do not anoint your child
with lotions and liniments,
do not dab her tender skin
with sweet scents,
do not burn incense.
See how naturally she smells
her sweet innocence—
the fragrance of the unsullied self,
the aroma
that derives its essence
from divine munificence.

Mother,
do not sprinkle rose water
on your little infant,
do not spray perfumes.
See how she exudes
a subtle redolence
that feeds on ambrosia—
the milk of your love's abundance.

The magnolia lends its secret grandeur
at the break of dawn,
the rose blushes
with the morning flush,
the *champa* and *chameli*
titillate the senses for the day,
and the *raat-ki-rani*
tingles the nostrils
during evenings and nights,
but the sweet fragrance of your infant
is there for you to savour
all the time.

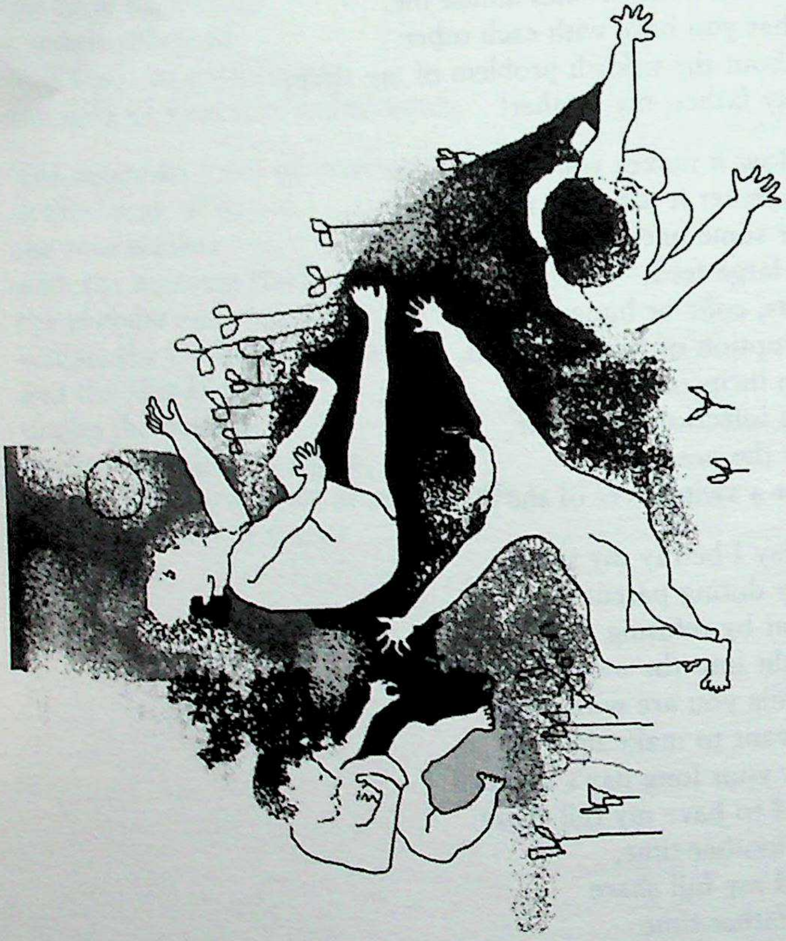
Champa, Chameli—Fragrant exotic flowers of the jasmine family.
Raat-ki-rani—cestrum nocturnum, an intensely aromatic flower.

Making Up for your Absence

Oh how the debates amuse me,
that you have with each other
about the ticklish problem of my sleep,
my father, my mother!

How it makes you wonder
whether it is just in my nature,
or some unease—
a large feed,
gas, colic or hunger,
eruption of the milk teeth,
an incipient rash,
an infection in my ear,
or the need
for a switchover of the diaper.

May I betray my secret,
my doting parents,
that by refusing to sleep
right into the morning hour,
while you are with me,
I want to make up
for your long day's absence
and to have my full share
of mother-time,
and my full share
of father-time
that I so patiently wait for
the whole day long?



Diaper Rash

Mother,
how you worry about the rash
on the bottom of your infant
that seems to appear
quicker than the change in diaper!

Oh how you tire
washing it with saline and warm water,
applying ointments, lotions and liniments,
on this rash
that refuses to disappear!

How peevish it makes your baby—
how sore,
how cranky—
this rash red and angry!

Makes you wonder, mother,
whether it is innate to the toddler,
or a special predilection
or an allergic reaction.

Could this rash just be
a reaction to the chemical irritation
and to the suffocation
inside this leak-proof diaper—
a price to pay
for the virtual comfort
of a non-touch disposal?
Mother, pray do not despair,
this rash could be
a cry for more air.

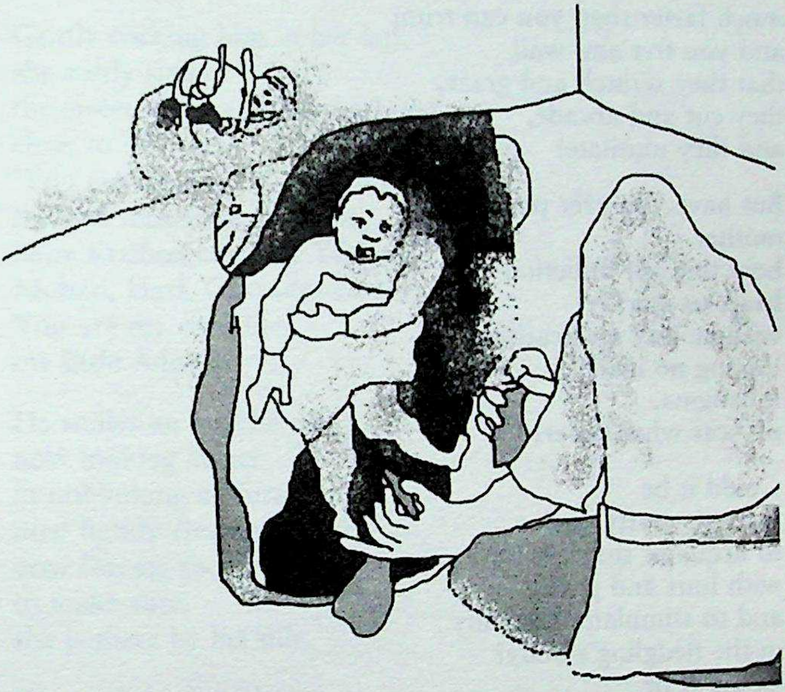
Remember, back home in India,
those unblemished bottoms
of infants nestling on mother earth,
free from the fetters
of napkins and diapers?

Mother,
throw away for a while
the trappings of modernity,
and let nature take over.

For a change,
dispense with the diaper
and give air,
give more air.

There sure will be
a little spill here and there
but the rash, before long,
is bound to disappear
as your toddler
trains her bowels and bladder—
learning the nitty-gritty of excretion,
through the control of reflex action.

Mittens



Mother,
why do you imprison
the tiny hands of your infant
in these velvety mittens?
Look, how helpless they make her.

These lovely little hands
that you enclose and insulate
are struggling to be free, mother,
to touch and feel everything
that is accessible to her.

You worry so much
when she unabashedly hurts herself,

clawing her nose, her cheeks, her chin
and everything within her reach
with her delicate transparent pink nails
that seem to grow
much faster than you can trim;
and you fret and wail
that they scratch and graze,
they cut and abrade,
and they mutilate!

But have you ever pondered,
mother,
how this self-infliction
heals so quickly
without any medication,
leaving no mark,
no stigma,
no scar whatsoever?

Could it be
nature's crafty device
to acquaint the new born
with hurt and pain,
and to stimulate immunity
in the fledgling's body?
Could it be
an exteriorisation
of an inner conflict
seeking a release?

Mother,
there may be a subtle message
in the infant's mutinous ways.
Pray, release her searching hands
from the constraints of these mittens.
They want to be free,
to hold yours
in an intimate, loving clasp.

They are crying to discover the self
through penance!

Mother's Vigil

Gently rocking him in her lap,
she softly sings
the sweet mantra of motherhood
close to his ear:
'You are the embodiment divine,
the god incarnate, all mine,
baby Krishna come to Yashoda,
Mohan, Hari, Govinda, Gopala.
You are my own life
my little Aditya.'

He smiles an angelic smile,
now looking at her
in unblinking admiration,
now lightly closing his eyes,
now forcing them open
to make sure
she is there by his side.

'You are the foundation,
you the basis and the justification,
you the cause and the effect,
you the creator, you the creation,
you the guide, you the preceptor,
you the shield, you the shelter,
you the victory, you the victor,
you the ferry, you the deliverer,'
and his eyes light up again
and lovingly he raises his hand
to feel her face
and brings it to rest
on his mother's breast.

'You are love's essence,
you the beloved, you the lover,
you the clothes-snatcher,
you the butter-stealing trickster,
you the serenading flute-player,'
she murmurs close to his ear,
patting his brow lightly,
touching his eager face,
as he watches in peace
and falls into light sleep.

'You are the sky, the air, the water
you the beginning, you the end,
you the whole, you the centre,
you the question, you the answer.'

She keeps chanting,
and watches him entranced
as he dream-smiles
his bewitching smile,
while she keeps vigil,
watching him take turns
between sleep and waking,
in alternating rhythm,
all through the day and the night,
in this divine interface,
singing her celestial song.

Mohan, Hari, Govinda, Gopala—the many names of god Krishna.

Lullaby

Let me comfort you in my waiting arms,
my blubbering one, my screaming one.

Let me feed you from my brimful breast,
my drooling one, my greedy one.

Let me pluck you the moon and the stars,
my demanding one, my commanding one.

Let me cuddle you to my fluttering heart,
my loving one, my prattling one.

Let me sing you a sweet melody,
my bright eyed one, my tuneful one.

Let me unravel my whole being to you,
my inquisitive one, my sapient one.

Let me rock you in my longing lap,
my dreamy one, my sleepy one.

Unblinking

Perched snugly
in the arms of his mother,
the three month baby
looks her straight in her eye,
taking her in,
each feature, each emotion,
with an unblinking admiration,
bonding,
inviting her to a game
as she looks back at him,
in direct communion—
unblinking,

Deep looketh into deep,
as they regard each other
in this unblinking game
but, before long, she tires,
her eyes fatigue and ache
and she gives up,
but he holds on,
his eyes fixed on her
with his magnetic spell,
untiring,
unblinking.

Her patience asunder,
she touches him lightly
to divert his gaze
but he jiggles his legs
and lifts his arms
to touch her face—
eyes fixed on her,
unblinking!

She offers him her breast,
and he latches on,
gaze fixed on her,
in unblinking gratitude.

She can play the game no longer
for fear
his unblinking eyes will tire;
gently she draws his lids
on the unblinking eyes,
but she reigns there,
supreme like a deity,
behind his lids,
and once she lets go
his eyes are on her again—
unblinking!

She lifts him
from the crook of her arm
to press him close to her heart,
to kiss the look in his eyes,
as he coos in delight,
never taking his eyes off her.
winning the blinking game—
unblinking in love.

Attaining Motherhood

How naturally,
how instinctively,
you assume your new role,
young mother!

How high in spirit,
how keen in cognition,
how gentle in speech,
how light on tread,
how soft to touch,
how sensitive to sounds,
how careful of smells,
how tender in heart,
how divine in looks!

What a transformation
from a carefree girl
to a doting mother!

Tranced by the magic
of your new born,
how you weave
a mosaic of fantasies,
singing your lullabies
in sweetest melodies,
toiling night and day
in love's labour.

How,
lost in the care of your infant,
you forget
pleasure and pain,

hunger and thirst,
insomnia and strain.

How rapturously you nurture
this marvel of creation,
young mother!

Let Tears Flow

Do not worry, young mother,
about the flights of mood
on the divine visage of your infant
when he pouts and scowls
or squeals and squirms.
Through this language of signs,
he may be trying to communicate
his innermost thoughts to you.

Do not panic little mother
when he cries and howls,
nor tear your heart out
when, in crying sometimes,
he holds his breath to lividity
for what seems an eternity.
Crying gives his fledgling lungs
a much needed exercise;
and breath-holding
could be the first lesson
in that yogic self-discipline,
they call the *Pranayama*.

Do not fret and fume mother
when tears well up in his eyes
and trickle down his cheeks
in pearls and in small streams.
They are the cleansing nectar
that wash his eyes
of any ungainliness around;
they brim over for you
in the first leavening of love.

Pranayama—Yogic exercises in breath control.

Revealed in a New Light

In our long journey together
I had never imagined
anything could transform you thus
till our grandchild arrived
and you broke all shackles of body and mind
to transcend into grand-motherhood.

Yes, you are revealed to me
in a new light,
transformed, my love,
as to yourself become love sublime;
lovelorn, love lost, love sick,
for this infant—
the offspring of your offspring,
the kernel of your seed.
the core of your core.

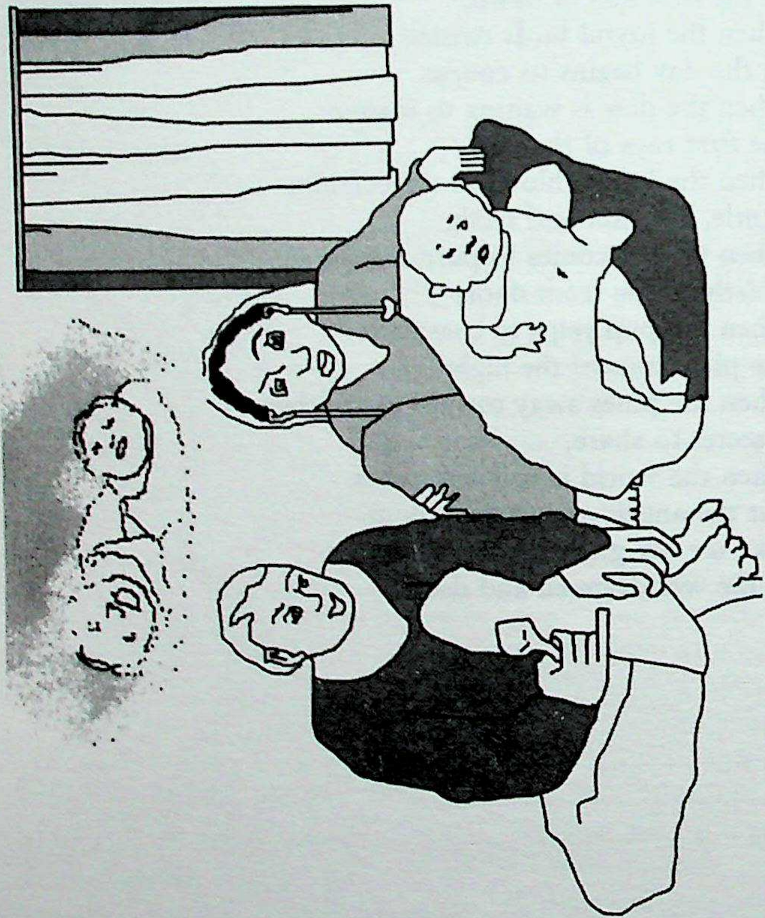
You never tire
humming and singing to him
lyric, lore and hymn,
invoking the gods
to lavish divine grace on him,
as this little bud slowly unfolds
to reveal to you
many a trait and hue
that would make
even angels proud.

When I watch in wonder
the intensity of your love,
your chaste indulgence
for this little miracle of life,

it dawns on me
that, while your passion may have dimmed
for so many things of life you once craved,
you have so deftly exchanged it
with a devotion sublime
that has taken you much nearer divinity
than I could ever divine.

Time for the Morning Walk

When the magnolia pours its treasure
at the first kiss of dawn,
when the joyful birds twitter
as the day begins its course,
when the dew is waiting to scatter
the first rays of the sun,
when the breeze blows in the corridor
gentle, fragrant and fresh,
when the cat comes to purr and ponder
quietly at the front door,
when the pup yelps to chase after
the phantoms of the night,
when the pines sway toward each other
a secret to share,
when the world is still a dreamer
but the angels are up and about,
take me my grandpa for a breather
in the woods green and deep.



Meeting Great-grandma First Time

At the most propitious hour,
and with divine invocation,
great-grandma holds him
gingerly, admiringly, in her lap—
this scion of her tribe,
the kernel of the kernel of her kernel,
the flesh of the flesh of her flesh,
the blood of the blood of her blood;
her quintessence,
her transcendence!

He opens into a big smile
as he watches her keenly,
looking unblinkingly at her—
the root of the root of his roots,
the cause of existence,
the fount of divine munificence!

They bond so quickly, so well;
she—with her loving gestures,
dandling him on her knees,
humming ancient tunes and lullabies;
he—rooting and cooing,
in full recognition
from his genetic memory,
scanning her face with his tiny fingers
in a deja vu of previous births.

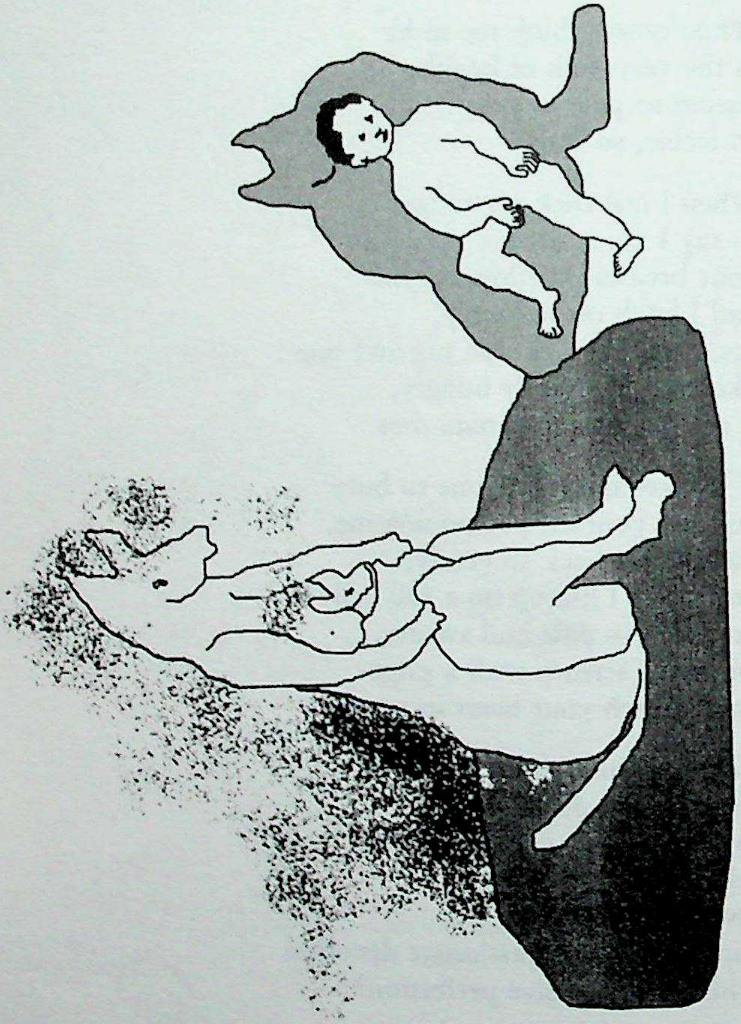
Mother how You Fuss Over Me!

While others think me to be
in the very pink of health,
I seem so pale to you,
so feeble, so frail.

When I just flick my tongue
to say I am ready for my feed
your breasts overflow for me
and I latch on so lustily,
yet, even as I pull and tug and bite
like one ravenously hungry,
it never seems to satiate thee.

If it takes me some time to burp
you tire yourself positioning me,
patting my back so gently;
and when I hiccup on a full belly
you turn so pale and sweaty;
while if I scream with a gripe
you wrench your heart in agony.

Can you then blame me,
for being so demanding,
my doting, my vigilant mother,
when you fuss over me,
lavishing your care,
showering your passionate devotion
with that obsessive perfection?



Kangaroo

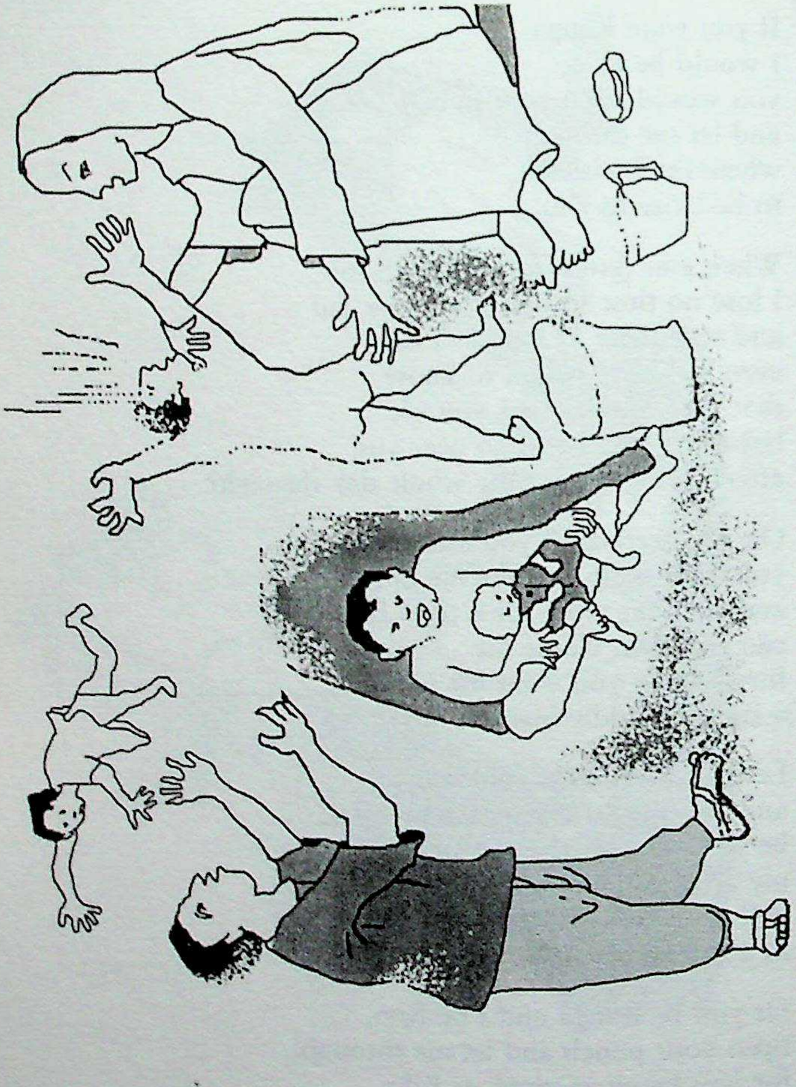
If you were Kanga
I would be Roo,
you would open your pouch
and let me through
whenever I wished
to be close to you.

When you return from a day's job
I lose no time to land into your lap
and stay there as long as I can
even as I have begun to know
that carrying me tires you so,
but can I help being so near you
after having waited the whole day through?

On your return, if you find me asleep,
you can't wait to wake me up,
and hold me close for a tight hug;
can you then blame me
for the way you want me to be,
a snugly, cuddly mama's boy?

Let me then caress your arms
and kiss the fatigue and ache away,
be with you for the rest of the day,
my arms round you to hold you close,
and sleep through the night
in a tight embrace.

Or you be Kanga and I be Roo,
open your pouch and let me through,
for you know as much as I do
how much you want me
to be near you.



Flesh and Blood Kid

When you throw me up in the air
to catch me back in your arms,
I produce the giggle
you are waiting for,
but sometimes the manoeuvre
jolts my vitals
and hurts me for sure.

When, in a loving gesture,
you pull at my cheeks
rather hard and long,
and in a burst of emotion
land kisses in profusion,
I quietly yield without a whimper,
though the affectionate shower
does sometimes stifle and smother.

When, for one reason or the other,
I yell or cry,
and foil all your endeavour
to console and comfort me,
and in your impatience sometimes
you shake me rather hard,
it does make me sit back,
and wonder!

When you give me a bath
even while I don't feel like it,
I sit in the tub and meekly submit,
and when you soap my hair
and my eyes smart
as you pour jug-fulls of water,

I yet manage a smile
for you to admire.

When, late on weekends,
you get together with friends
for music, dance and dinner,
the pitch and tempo
often wakes me from my sleep,
yet I readily join the revelry
even when it breaks my rhythm
and upsets my fledgling bio-clock,
for I want to be a sport
and not let you down.

But I am no rag doll,
no toy,
nor a dull-witted boy,
but a flesh and blood kid
barely four months old,
yet coy,
sometimes wanting to be left alone,
to devices that are my very own,
to be at ease with the world,
and with myself at peace.

You are My Time

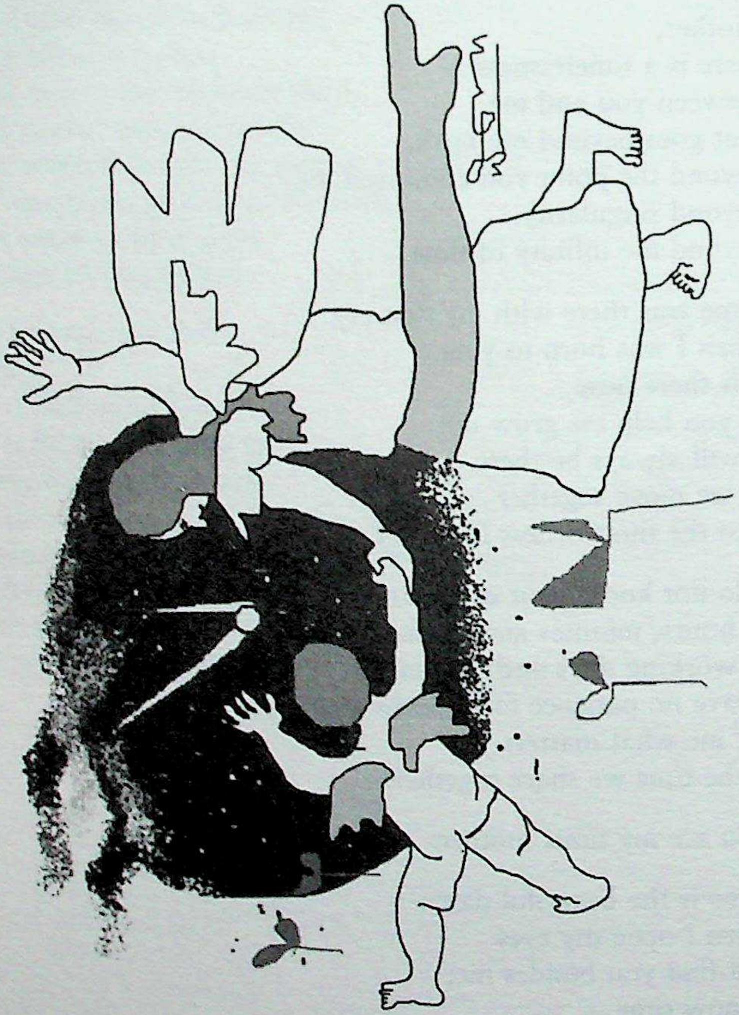
Mother,
there is a timelessness
between you and me
that goes beyond my birth,
beyond the point you conceived me,
beyond singularity,
beyond the infinity of time.

Time was there with my first cry
when I was born to you;
it is there now
as you help me grow up;
it will always be there
as we move together
into the timelessness hereafter.

I do not know your calendar
of hours, minutes and seconds,
of working days and weekends;
I have no patience for months and years;
for me what matters
is the time we share together.

You are my time, mother.

Time is the beautiful dawn
when I open my eyes
and find you besides me;
I know time
when I seek you during the day
and you materialise for me;
time is the golden sunset
when you are always there



to sing the evening song;
time is the stars and the rising moon
that you always pluck for me;
time is the quiet night
when you lull me to sleep.

There is a timelessness between us,
dear mother.

Let there be Light

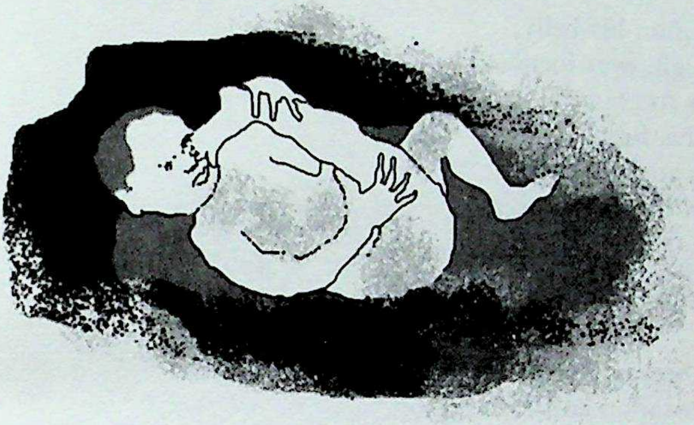
Why secure me in the crib,
and swaddle me in layers of clothes?
I would love to be free
to flex my arms and kick my legs,
to raise my head and lift my chin,
to turn my neck and look around.

Why strap me to the stroller
to be pushed by others?
I would rather be unbound
and roll over on the ground
to throw my weight around.

Why shut the windows
and draw the blinds?
Pray, raise the curtains
and open the shutters
to let in the world outside—
its sights, smells and sounds?

Plenty of light and sunshine
is what I love
and a whiff of fresh breeze
on my inquisitive face.

Thumb-Sucking



Why does the infant
savour sucking her thumb,
and her fingers?
Look how she doubles herself up
to get a mouthful of the big toe!

Can she be hungry
even while she refuses
both the bottle and the breast?
Is she bored,
is she sad,
is she ruminating,
is she stressed?

Is it self-acquaintance
or self love;
or the search of the Super-self
through the self?

Pray who knows,
who knows better
than the little one?

Learning to Crawl

Pivoting on his belly,
head high, eyes focussed,
he tries to crawl
on all his fours,
aiming at the red ball
that mother has placed
on the floor,
so near to him,
yet so far!

But, a stranger to the secrets
of gravitation and locomotion,
in trying to push forwards,
to catch the ball,
he only seems to go rearwards!

Mother, watching nearby,
brings the ball near,
temptingly close to his finger.

He starts again,
a glint in his eye,
morale yet high,
beating his limbs in a flurry
to get across in a hurry,
but the distance grows even more
between him and his goal!

Mother brings the ball nearer,
just a leap away
and tantalisingly closer.

With a renewed resolve,
he aims forwards,
on all his fours,
but back he goes again.

Back and back
away from the ball
and he can not understand it all
till his little feet reach the wall
and to his great surprise
he discovers a foothold!
He pushes hard against the wall,
a long leap forward
and a fling at the ball,
alack, only a touch and go
and the ball rolls away, lo!

But with the first whiff of success
can there be any stopping now?

Eyes gleaming, focussed on the ball,
he swims in the uncharted seas—
his belly the boat,
his limbs the oars,
his hope the rudder—
gliding gently forwards,
as he toils hard to gather speed
and reaches the goal at last,
grasping the ball in his tiny hands—
a triumphant look,
a blissful smile!

Wonderingly he discovers,
at his tender age,
some of nature's fantastic laws—
the pulls of gravitation,
and the laws of motion.

Gratefully he learns
the ground rules of action—
the effort and the co-ordination,
a tactical retreat before an advance,
a step back to gain two forth.
Wisely he understands
the secrets of success—
the determination to play one's part,
to move on without losing heart.
Sagely he absorbs the Karmic lessons—
having set out on life's journey
never to lose sight of the goal.

Karmic—of Karma (destiny)

She Fights Sleep

How sleep eludes my little one;
how it makes us wonder
why she doesn't pause a while
from her daylong activity,
in her voyage of discovery
from one room to another,
around the furniture and under,
while the world goes to slumber.

Grandma believes
it is something in the genes
or in the personality
that makes her a vigilante.

Yet, we all feel
she needs some respite,
but how so hard we may try
to help her to sleep—
vary positions and holds
to prompt her womb memory,
rock her gently,
and sing the sweetest melody—
she fights it off
ever so resolutely.

At the end of a long day,
tired and worn out with play,
as we force her into the crib
to rock her to sleep
and sing her a lullaby,
she hums herself a long note
so loud and melancholy,

as she shuts her eyes lightly,
only to give a startle again
on one pretext or the other,
for even the drop of a feather
wakes her up from sleep.

Pray shut off all the gadgets—
the refrigerator, the pressure cooker,
the dishwasher, the air conditioner—
oh how terribly they distract her!

Pray turn the lights low
and try walking on tiptoe.
Pray, speak in a whisper
for this little one here
needs the flimsiest excuse
to tear off the mantle of snooze.

She is Everywhere

My little toddler,
like a butterfly,
now here, now there,
now everywhere.

Wobbly, yet sure-footed,
during her passage
from one place to another,
she takes direction
as if by some intuition,
picking little objects on the way,
almost automatically,
and dropping others
that are in her clasp,
as if by design.
Some she ignores
and some she adores,
some she keeps
only to throw away,
some she throws away
only to seek again.

Now she mines from the thick carpet
a tiny crumb or a grain of sugar
that would escape a mortal eye;
now she catches a squirmy insect
holding it with impunity
between her tiny thumb and forefinger
proudly handing it over
to her frightened mother;
now she breaks a cobweb,
watching the spider take flight,

to her amazement and laughter;
now she forages from the kitchen
forks, spoons and knives,
sugar, salt and pepper;
now she ventures into the bathroom
to unravel the long tissue roll
and tie herself in interminable knots;
now she upsets the garbage can
to recover a lost spoon, a trashed letter;
now she overturns the flower pots
and exults in tearing the petals asunder;
and now she rifles through books
to contemplate on a title cover.

Pray is there a purpose in this,
is there a meaning
beyond what reason dictates?

Yashoda

Like mother Yashoda,
pandering to the pranks of Krishna,
little mother here
is busy dawn to dusk
keeping pace with the pattering footsteps
of her tireless toddler
as he draws her unawares
from one room to another,
through passageways and doors
along alleys into bowers.

Always in a high sporting gear,
the little playmate runs her around
as he throws helter-skelter,
dolls, toys and sundries
for mother to pick and hand over
so the wanton child tosses them away
over and over again
to keep her in thrall.

Now laughing, now in earnest,
now demanding, now clamorous,
now disciplined, now riotous,
opening a cupboard here,
shutting a closet there,
scattering objects everywhere,
the little trickster
works a spell on his mother.

Setting the tone with his blabber
he makes his captive mother
run from one function to another-

a wash now, a bath later,
a change of dress, a switch over of the diaper-
and while the maverick is about
engrossed in one game or another,
morsels in hand follows mother
for the little one to savour,
as he gobbles a little now
and now shows no care.

Self-negating, self-annihilating,
like an ascetic
she revels in total surrender,
to the whims and wiles
of the little imp.

She joyfully renounces everything,
yielding to the bliss of motherhood.

The Prospect of Returning to Day Care

Parks and pavements,
museums and monuments,
zoos and arboretums,
merry-go-rounds and bus rides—
you want me to take in all,
at my tender age,
ten months all in all.

You drive ninety minutes,
for a hundred and ten miles,
from Monroeville to Montgomery,
and fly all the way from there
via Atlanta to Washington DC,
wanting me to discover the world,
to initiate and educate me,
(so to speak, naturalistically),
living in hotels,
visiting places,
watching people—
new faces, curious and friendly,
smiling at me so appreciatively—
and all through the week
tied to both of you inseparably,
my mummy and daddy.

Can you then blame me
when the prospect of returning
to my day-care after the return journey,
blunts my appetite
for play, and food and everything,
and I cling to you ever so forcefully?

Could I get some time
to wean slowly
from the heady days out of Monroeville city
in your blissful company?

I mean no offence
to the day-care centre,
I have no complaints
against the care giver;
but frankly,
it is only the two of you,
dear mother, dear father,
that makes all sense,
that is the Shangri-La
and the essence.

Let Me Use My Hands and Feet

Do I need the sipper any more
when I am eleven months old
and can hold a glass at last
in my own hands with confidence,
to drink my water in gulps
like all the adults;
and sip my tea slowly,
blowing air from my mouth
to let it cool in the cup—
what, if in the process,
I spill a little on the mat
and make a mess
of my dress?

Is the feeding bottle any use
when I can drink my milk
from the cup with ease
and not have to suck so hard
at the lazy nipple of the bottle
that collapses so fast
and makes me wait
till it inflates back
with hisses and sighs?

I have no use for spoons
of silver and gold,
for I can eat with my own hands
and direct the food into my mouth,
what if some of it litters the floor
and some daubs my face.

Away with the walker and the stroller,
and off with the shoes and the socks;

I want to run barefooted across
to get a feel of the ground and grass;
walk to the bush and pick a flower
and peep deep to find the nectar;
take control of the watering hose
and squirt some water here and there;
and wade through the stream,
some fish and marbles to discover.

Do I care
if I wet myself in the water
or a tiny thorn runs into my flesh
or the pollen causes an allergic rash
or I sustain a fall now, a tumble later
or a bug bites me somewhere?

To use my own hands and feet,
sans shackles, sans implements,
and to have a free run
makes life such a great fun.

Surrender to Her

She is grateful,
and always in readiness
to return your little indulgence
many times over.

Like a fond pet
she materialises in your lap
at the first hint of your smile
only to wriggle out the very moment
she suspects your devotion
or undivided attention,
for she has an instinct
to see through you
and to draw a line
between love and ostentation,
between flattery and admiration.

You may succeed for some time
in winning her over,
with your tricks and antics,
with candies, dainties, and gifts;
you may pretend to be
her horse or pup,
her camel or cub,
or even a slave,
but she will shy away in a wink
at the first hint of indifference.

She will always be there
and ready to give her all—
her playful exuberance
her pristine innocence,

her sharp percipience—
if you shun your pretence
and, like a true devotee,
surrender your all
to her.

SECTION FOUR

THE ONE YEAR MILESTONE

Before you were conceived I wanted you
Before you were born I loved you
Before you were here an hour I would die for you
This is the miracle of life.

(Maureen Hawkins)

One Year Progress Report

1

One year back when you were born,
blue at birth through a cord-prolapse,
the result of an obstetrical lapse
that led to an urgent caesarean,
you defied the low Apgar* score
to be on course in minutes four.

From there you would not look back,
weaning fast from the oxygen mask,
from tubes, catheters and monitors
within a matter of twelve hours,
and back from the intensive care
to rest on your mother's breast
to brace yourself for a new conquest.

2

From maternity to home at last
into grandparents' waiting arms,
who travelled from distant shores
to tender their love and care,
with hymns, lore and lullabies,
that set you on an even keel
in the sylvan retreat of Monroeville.

3

You so bravely fought
that tardy healing of the cord
till it finally fell off
to give you a clean navel;
you survived the big scare

of the long breath-holding spell
caused by four vaccination shots
given in tandem, one after the other;
and when your eyes glued together
every time you woke up from sleep
you patiently bore that pressure
we applied with our forefinger
against the lachrymal sac
to force open your tiny tear ducts.

4

Soon followed the saga
of burps and hiccups,
of sleep fighting so very shy,
of self-inflicted scratches
and the diaper rash,
of colic, spitting and unrest,
of nipple confusion
between the bottle and the breast.

5

You tuned your sight, smell and sound
to the inputs all around,
you positioned your sweet little mouth
to draw the nectar from mama's breast,
you flung your tiny searching hands
to explore whatever came near
and focussed your sparkling eyes
on anything that came within ken
and even far into the horizon.

6

Then to turn your neck and side,
lie on the belly and look at the ground
to get an idea of space
downside up and upside down.

You lapped up the switch-over
from the lap of mother
to the arms of father,
and from one grandparent to the other,
and it did not take you long
to overcome the first fear of water
and enjoy your daily shower.

7

You maintained your exercise schedule
that you began in your mother's womb
and flung your arms and kicked your legs,
stating your intent the first moment
you learnt to crawl on your belly
that you would move out of the sanctuary
of loving laps and cuddling arms
to explore the big broad space
and not be carried from place to place.

8

And came the time to sit up and grasp,
to hold the objects in your clasp
to look at the world face to face
and the third dimension of space.

Soon it was the silver spoon
supplanting the bottle and the breast,
to fortify your feed now and then
with egg white, cereals and fruit,
but you would rather use your hands
and seize whatever came your way
and direct it into your exploring mouth
to give heartaches all around
lest you choke on the objects you found.

9

Soon you stood on your own feet,
soon to sustain your first fall;
but tired of that belly crawl
you would rather stand and fall
than glide on your belly for hours
or leap-frog on all your fours.

Through tumble-downs and somersaults
you ventured into your first steps,
and more steps on the forward march,
holding on to objects near and around
till you made sure of secure ground.

10

And it was not long before
you found you needed no more
the chairs, tables, walls for support
and that you could walk on your own
inside the house and outdoors
on to the voyage of discovery
towards an unfolding mystery.

11

All through the year
from the moment you were born
and uttered your first cry,
you made attempts to communicate
through language so delicate—
of sights, sounds and signs,
of grunts, gurgles, and gutturals,
of labials and linguals,
of smiles, chuckles and laughter—
to graduate to a stage
when you managed to utter,
that sound of sounds,

that magic mantra, 'Ma-Ma'
that every mother craves to hear
and the magic word, 'Pa-Pa'
that is sweet music to every father.

12

And today, on your birthday,
you give us all a run for our time
and endear yourself to us
with your magical power on us—
your sharp wit, your dalliance,
your overpowering presence—
and we can hardly help admire
how brave, how sporting you are.

---

*Apgar Score—a point system from 0-10 to evaluate the condition of a new born at birth.

No Sloppy Diets, Please

No sloppy diets any more for me,
no juices, no fruit medleys,
no formulae.

With my six incisors
I am big enough
to claim my bite—
a nibble at the apple,
a lunge at the banana,
a pick of the salad.

And I am sporting too
to share with others—
crisps and French fries,
chicken and pickled fish,
burger and gourmet coffee,
and a toast for the day!

Creating Space

My son, hardly a year old,
would like to seize command
and go on and on
pushing his walker in top gear
were it not for the wall
that stands in the way
and acts as a damper.

Makes him wonder
why the wall does not disappear
to pave the way
for an unfettered run.

But it does not take him long
to discover
that he is not Moses
and the walls will not go under
for him and his walker,
that he has to toil
and learn to manoeuvre,
steering his walker a shade around
just before he approaches the wall
and run around in circles
rather than a straight line,
to create space,
even it be
in the confines of a small place.

Time to Wake Up—1

When the roosters are still roosting,
the night in her prime,
and the stars shining bright,
a little toddler in his crib
wakes up to announce the day,
'Cock-a-doodle-do.
Wake up, wake up all of you.'

He opens his eyes wide,
O where, o where is Mom
and where may Dad be?

He sits up and looks around,
across the railing to his parents' bed,
and there they are,
and his face lights up
as he coos,
and coos again,
'Cock-a-doodle-do.
Mama, my darling, wake up,
Dad, my dear, you too.'

He stands and braces himself up
against the railing of his bed,
and extends his arm towards them
and crows aloud:
'Aaaa Eeee Oooo,
Cock-a-doodle-do.
It is time to play
with both of you.'

Time to Wake Up—2

Reflexly they pull him out of the crib,
impatiently they settle him betwixt them,
dreamily they cajole and comfort him,
drowsily they hum a lullaby,
languidly they fall off to sleep again.

But sleep eludes the amused infant;
disentangling himself from their clasp,
he sits up, wide awake;
contemplating the next move!

Before long,
it seems too long a time,
and he turns to his mother,
gently caressing her arm.
She suppresses a somnolent smile
and keeps sleeping.
He turns to his father
and tickles his day-old bristling beard.
Dad mumbles sweet nothings
and turns his back on him.
He turns to the doll nearby
and invites it to a game.
The doll gives a quizzical wink
and grows limp in his hand again!

His patience wearing thin
it is time for renewed action.
Softly he fondles Mom's face,
and tries to force open her eyes,
but mom shuts them tighter.
Gently he pulls at Dad's sleeve;

dad opens his eyes awhile
soon to return
to the world of gossamer dreams.

But, not for him give up,
not in this state of *Turiya;*
he settles mama's glasses on her face,
he prods and pushes his father awake,
he shakes the doll into an upright state,
and, before dawn breaks the night's shell,
our little master gives a loud yell:
'Aaaa Eeee Oooo,
Cock-a-doodle-do.
Wake up mother,
wake up father,
it is time to wake up,
both of you.'

Turiya—state of heightened consciousness.

Dandelion

Gentle flower in the grass,
perched on sleep's slender stalk;
a dream with a central theme,
branching into gossamer florets
of an infant's reveries.

Proud flower in the turf,
light in colour, upright in stance;
a dream encased in a tiny dome,
waiting for a hard breeze
to be blown across the valleys,
or a single strong breath
to accomplish a wish—
a single wish for a single blow
that unravels the floret's,
all together, in one go.

Mystery flower in the wild,
unpretentious and quiet;
catching the eye of a curious child
asking his adoring grandfather
the secret of your splendour
as you day dream out here.

Dainty flower, frail and tender,
the infant holds you with grace and care,
in the manner of his grandfather,
between his thumb and forefinger,
and endeavors to blow you over,
to unravel the dreamy secret there—
a single breath for a single wish—
but he just manages to dislodge,
a floret here, a floret there.

He repeats with another flower,
and yet another,
a stronger breath every time,
but fails in that endeavour
to disperse the florets, all together.

Not for him to accept defeat
when victory seems so near.
With a sudden sleight of hand,
simultaneous with his breath,
he scatters the florets all over—
baby dreams sailing away
landing like little parachutes,
on the vast sea of consciousness.

Happily, the child knows not
what a wish is,
yet, if he were to wish,
he would,
a free-blowing strong breath
that would send in one blow
the florets of the dandelion flower
sailing everywhere
like stars in the sky.

Beyond the First Year

Now that I am one year old
and a big boy already
I would love to be on my own,
to do what I love to do
and be what I want to be.

For, as you can see,
when I stand
and you take your hands
off me,
no longer do I fumble and fall,
but, on the contrary,
go for that first step
you have been, so impatiently,
waiting for

When, in your curiosity,
you ask me
to point out where the bulb is
and where the TV,
where the phone
and where the PC,
I do it so readily,
and clap my hands in joy
when you applaud admiringly.

Look, how I can play with my toys
and push in the slot of this maze
this coloured little ball,
and tap it if it does not fall,
and open the trap door
to retrieve the ball!
And, if by chance,

the ball gets caught somewhere
in the labyrinth of ladders,
landings and passages
I know how to cajole and manoeuvre,
to salvage the ball, for sure.

And talking of magical tricks,
only last month
you would make me wonder
when, with the sleight of your hand,
you made an object to disappear
and with another sleight
made it suddenly reappear.

But now it is my turn
to explode with laughter
when I hide a ball
and you fail to find it anywhere
till it materialises by that trick
I picked from you,
my clever father.

I can hum a tune and dance,
and with a change of theme
change my rhythm and stance,
and I know how to patronise
kids smaller than me,
and with my etiquette and charm
surprise all and sundry.

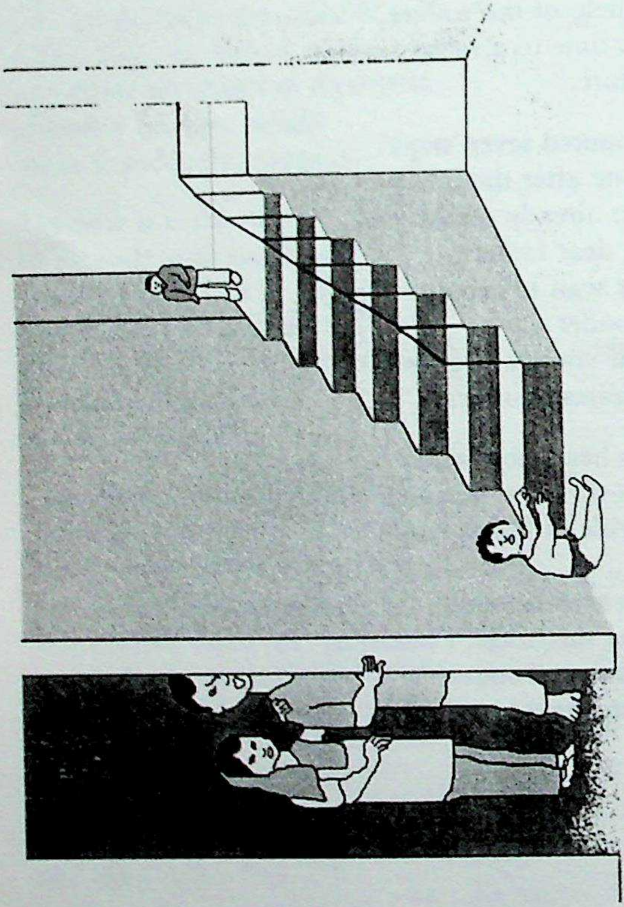
I like to share that banana
you want me to eat,
to seize it from your hand,
and offer you a bite
for every bite you offer me
even when I make it so messy,
for I try to be on my own,
and to be what you want me to be.

On the Run

Only a month back
when I reached my first year
I took my first step
without the help of the walker,
but now it is time to give up all fear
of fall or failure.

Then, you counted seven steps
that I took one after the other
but now I am already on the run,
dear mother, dear father,
and I can not wait to cross the room
to the side yonder
where both of you wait for me,
arms wide, hearts aflutter.

And, I like to hear mom's clap
and dad's full-throated laughter
that you provide in full measure
when I cross
one milestone after another,
and running at this stage, I discover,
is the surest way to conquer
the gravity that makes one falter.



The Stairs

They fascinate him, these stairs,
as he stands contemplating them
from the foyer below.

They intrigue him, these stairs,
every time he is carried up,
and as he looks down
from the landing above.

They have tempted him, these stairs,
with their magic
of connecting the two worlds,
even as he is forbidden
to put his foot on them on his own,
lest he falls down.

But how long can a child
repress his inquisitiveness;
how long can fear win over
the spirit of adventure?

He decides to take the first step
in life's upward climb
as he lifts his leg gingerly,
placing one foot on the first rung,
almost falling backwards
but balancing soon,
holding on to the railing,
now peeping down from there,
now looking up the next step,
up the next step and up,
pausing every time,
each a giant stepping stone

till he reaches step four
and decides to return to ground floor
to renew the journey at a later hour.

As he turns around to alight
he has no idea whatsoever
how to reverse his steps
and climb down the stairs.
But not for him to call for help,
not for him to lose heart,
he stands there contemplating,
wanting to do it on his own.

With his face towards the stairs,
he lies athwart on his belly
and glides down backwards,
his shins and belly for skates,
his feet the anchor,
his hands the pedals
till he touches ground again!.

With that first kiss of success
could anything stop him
from trying again and again
reaching the top in a few days
to savour the bliss of triumph?

That is why
they never tire him now—
these stairs,
that bridge the two worlds—
as he goes up fast to the top
and turns around to skate
all the way down,
in one joyous ride.

He is No Ordinary Kid

Mother,
why do you worry yourself to distraction
when your baby falls ill,
when he catches a cold
or contracts a cough,
when he gets a runny nose
or a funny tummy,
when he evinces a rash
or runs fever,
or cries for no reason whatsoever.

Look,
how one moment he suffers quietly
with this fever unknown
but gets down to play
without any ceremony
as soon as he improves a little,
to lift your spirits
and to cheer you up.

Look,
how he gets over that asthmatic spell
by the sheer strength of will
as you comfort him in your lap,
even before you place that mask
of the nebulizer on his mouth.

Look,
when he falls down from the chair
or trips over,
how quickly he steadies himself
without a whimper,
and produces that wide smile

to reassure you
that there is nothing the matter.

Mother,
he may seem so fragile,
yet so persevering is he,
so unpretentious, so brave,
beyond pain and beyond suffering,
beyond the reach of harm.

There may be a meaning
in all this,
in all he goes through
and all he does,
the way he suffers,
the way he conquers.

Brave Kid

Believe me mom,
last night's croup
was not meant to give you a scare,
especially when your hands are full,
and Dad's birthday so very near.

With change of jobs for both of you,
house to move,
and travel to a distant town—
a thousand miles to the west,
they call the Silicon valley—
I could have done without this cold,
the runny nose, the hacking cough,
and the wheeze and sneeze
that gives you both such unease.

Yet, I cannot wait to move outdoors,
to brave the wind, even when cold,
and run on the turf and jump the kerb
to join the kids across the road.

Then is it my fault, my darling mom,
if in that act of good neighbourliness,
and in spite of all the precautions,
I manage to catch the 'flu virus?

But, with Dad's birthday very near
I already feel so much the better
with cough syrups and the nebulizer,
and your tender loving care.

Siva is Back

Ever since we remember,
he has been a part of our lives—
our little Siva—
and we carry him with us,
during our travels.

So he was with us,
our travelling Siva,
on our holiday in the USA
to spend the summer
with our daughter.

There, in the family room,
in a quiet corner,
we contrived for him
a make-shift tabernacle,
for our daily worship and prayer.

Aditya, our grandson,
joined us often,
giving little Siva a bath
with milk and rose water;
showering floral tributes,
lighting a lamp, burning incense;
holding him in his dainty hands
with a true devotee's reverence;
marvelling at his cool granite touch,
his solid, serene ambience;
even thrusting it playfully in his mouth
giving us a scare at times.

Then came the shock one morning;
the tabernacle was empty,
Siva was gone!

Oh how we searched—
behind the doors and curtains,
under the beds and carpets,
in the drawers and cupboards.
We turned the bags and boxes over,
we ransacked Aditya's toys,
we looked in the house everywhere,
treading the backyard and the lawn,
scouring every nook and corner!

Where was Siva,
we asked Aditya?
Did he hide him somewhere,
did he put him in his mouth?
He opened his mouth wide
in the manner of infant Krishna
when chided by mother Yashoda
for eating mud in the yard.
Alas we lacked the divine vision
to see the macrocosm there—
the creation and dissolution,
the reality and illusion!

There was vacant space
where Siva once stood;
there was a void all round,
and a vacuum in our thoughts
that grew from day to day,
and, with it, a sadness,
and a pain in our hearts.

Nothing helped,
neither a renewed search
nor prayers, nor penance.

Aditya, a child of delight,
wondered at the metamorphosis—
the absence of bonhomie,
of hilarity, of joy;
our sad, searching countenance;
the quietude,
the trance.

And then one day,
not long after,
the miracle happened!
As we opened our eyes
from meditation and morning prayer,
there, standing in front of us,
was little Aditya,
having materialised like a god—
a sparkle in his eyes,
a meaningful smile on his face,
his cheek bulging,
lips pouting,
offering a peeping glimpse of Siva,
drawing him playfully in his mouth
back and forth, and back again,
tantalising us with his game,
making us nervous
lest he chokes on little Siva.

With folded hands,
we counselled caution,
all entreaty, all supplication,
and then, with one flourish,
our messiah
delivered little Siva
into our quivering hands!

Siva was reinstalled in full ceremony
to the chanting of sacred mantras.

Life returned
as the empty spaces filled again,
and the pain and sadness evaporated
as mysteriously as had Siva materialised,
while Aditya,
watching us amusedly and in joy,
danced and laughed his divine laugh!

Mine Alone

Mom, Dad and Nausheen
are watching a video recording
made a year earlier
when the little one
was just a 5-month toddler.

She watches for some time
all curiosity and wonder
but can not take it any longer
as she finds her dad and mom lovey-dovey
with that infant on the monitor.

She looks from the TV
to her parents sitting besides her
and draws close to them, and closer,
to feel them near,
and make sure that they are there,
with her,
and not with that kid yonder.

'It is you with us over there,
and none other,
playing with us when you were small
last year,'
explains mother.

She again looks
from the picture of her parents
fondling that other kid,
to them sitting beside her
in flesh and blood,
but she can not reconcile
one with the other.

She quietly picks the remote
and switches off the camcorder
as if to declare,
'You can be only mine,
my dad and mom,
mine alone as I am now;
you can belong to none other,
not even the one
who was me last year.'

A Dad's Plea

Dad labours all day long
propitiating and pleasing his daughter,
inventing devices to befriend her,
seeking new expressions
of his adoration for her,
yet, she commands all his attention
and orders him about
to obey her flights of fancy,
to cater to her endless demands!

But when it is her mother
she addresses her in singsong tones,
cajoling,
imploring,
dishing out endearments—
Mama,
Mommy,
Mamai—
begging attention,
all supplication,
flatteringly drawing her near
in that deft motion?

Is there a flaw in his devotion,
asks father?

Wonderful father,
that your child is so spontaneous,
so forthright with you,
and so natural,
is a testimony of your love for her,
a tribute to the selfless surrender

of a worthy father,
a friend, guide and philosopher.

Yet, motherhood is all these
and more—
it is a kinship outside the realm of logic,
beyond definition,
beyond measure.

Motherhood transcends
the bonds of flesh and blood
and the domain of the genes.

Motherhood is divine at the core,
infinite like the cosmos.

Motherhood is
the mother of all relationships.

Everything at its Time

When Dad snatched the bottle of milk
from his little daughter's hand,
feeling she was too old for it,
she gave him a hurt and angry look.

In our enthusiasm
to enforce a timetable for milestones
and to see kids grow before their time
may we not be hurting them
through, what seem to us,
pious deeds of parental duty?

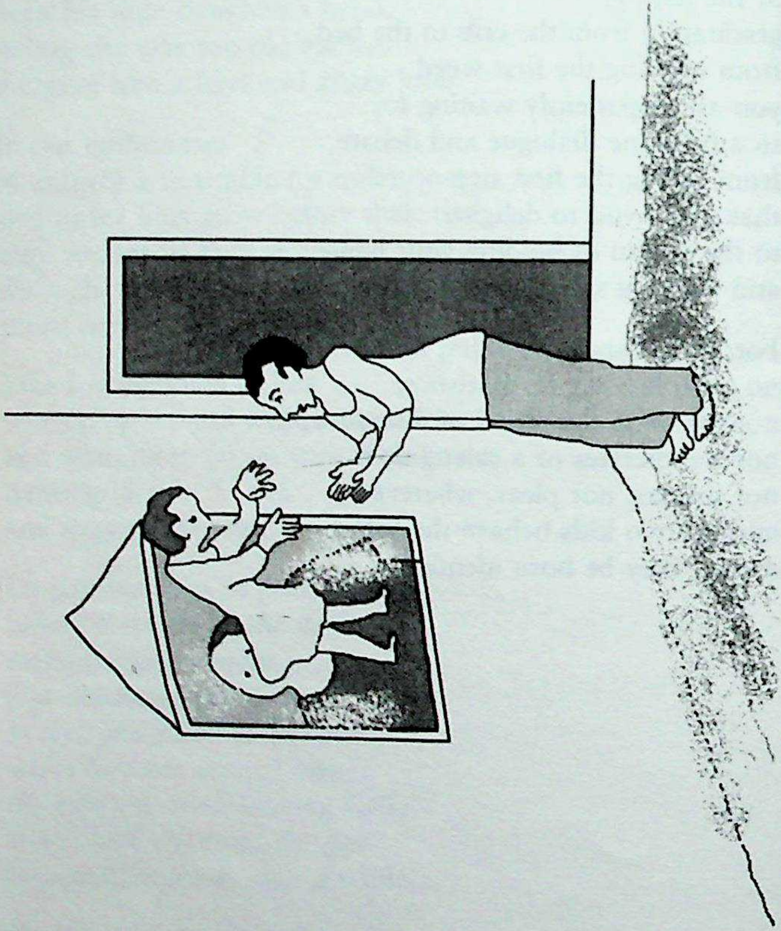
Like forcing them to bed
when they are still wide awake
and wanting to go on with their games,
dancing like the fairies
and singing like nightingales.

Or putting them to potty training
before it is time in the day,
making them wonder
if it is another fun game
as they are asked to sit there
while they are coaxed on—
the exercise often proving futile
as the kids rise from the pot
to ease themselves after a while.

Or teaching them the three As
before they are able to communicate,
and asking them to draw and paint
before they can hold a pencil or crayon
in their tiny tremulous hands.

There is a time for everything—
time for the kids to grow,
to attain milestones
when it is their turn—
be it weaning from the breast
or the nappy,
graduating from the crib to the bed,
from uttering the first word
you are impatiently waiting for
to a full-time dialogue and debate,
from taking the first step
that sends you to delight,
to the dream of holding your hand
and walking side by side.

For, kids respect no rules, no laws,
no postulations, no statistics;
not for them the rigors of discipline,
nor the dictates of a calendar,
nor threats, nor pleas, whatever;
and no two kids behave the same,
even if they be born identical.



When I Look at Your Picture

When I contemplate your picture
looking straight at me,
all wonder and curiosity,
wanting to jump out of the frame
to land in my lap directly,
and pose that innocent question:
'Grandpa, when I hear so much about you—
what in a given situation
you would or would not do;
how, if you were around,
you would hold me near
with such tender care—
my heart jumps
as I begin to wonder,
what stops us
from meeting each other?

'And when mother hears
that long distance call
and runs to pick up the receiver
to speak with you for a whole hour,
I do not raise hell
even if it be a longer spell,
but marvel all the more
at what it is in you
that touches her to the core?

Then the urge to meet thee
gets the better of me.'

Your poser makes me ponder,
my lovely little grand daughter,

how long do I wait for destiny
to make us meet in person again—
you and me—
to give me the chance
to decipher
the meaning of your chatter,
to imbibe some of your innocence,
to be nearer to you, my little angel,
and your divine munificence.

For, as surely as you are drawn
from the sublime
to the vortex of humanity,
time is running out for me,
as I age and fade, imperceptibly,
into eternity.

You Grow into Our Consciousness, Shereen

Though we were with you
just for a few weeks, when you were born,
you grow into our consciousness
like a deity—
worshipped and adored.

When we parted
you were barely four weeks old,
still trying to come to terms
with the curious world
outside your mother's womb.

With parting hugs and kisses,
with sighs and tearful eyes,
we said good byes
while you watched
lying helplessly in the crib,
sharing with us
that moment of great emotion,
the choking and the palpitation.

You could not even turn your head
but followed us with your eyes
till we were out of sight,
thus making sure
to walk into our lives,
to pervade our thoughts,
to fill our being,
to grow into our consciousness
ever since.

It does not seem
that we never met

since we last held you in our lap,

but that you have grown
under our vigilant eye
thousands of miles in the distance,
more than two years in time.

Otherwise how do we explain—
you suffer a cold, we sneeze with you,
you run a temperature, we get the rigor,
your sleep is disturbed, we stay awake,
and when you are at your healthful best
we sing and dance with joy.

Little grandchild,
we always wonder
what passes in your mind,
when you communicate on the phone
during those week-end calls,
pouring sweet melody in our ears
the loving refrain:
'Dadco O Dadco...
Nani O Nani...'
in those dulcet tones.

It is then
that the heart gets a squeeze,
the eyes moisten,
and the limbs quiver and tighten
for a long leap across the oceans
to reach you,
and hold you in a tight embrace.

Shereen, sweet Shereen,
you grow
beyond the mundane human sentiments—
innocent and unfettered,
life of life,
a bundle of wonder and joy.

Shereen,
sweet Shereen,
you grow in our thoughts
a vision of enchanting childhood,
as we grow in yours
some unseen distant wonder.

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*Dadco, Nani—grandfather and grandmother.

SECTION FIVE

THE TWO YEAR MILESTONE

Your children are not your children
They are the sons and daughters
of life's longing for itself.

(Khalil Gibran)

A Day in the Life of a Two Year Old

(1)

A Big Blind Spot

Ever since her nanny quit,
little Nausheen is out of gear;
she is fretful, full of fear,
waking often during the night
as if from a nightmare.

As they go about their morning
from one task to another,
she clings to her Mom and Dad—
limbs tense, brows knitted,
and a dull moan getting louder
as the office hour approaches near.

Nothing interests her,
neither toys nor picture books,
and grand parents arrived from India,
ever in readiness, and so eager
to hold her in their loving care,
stay in her blind spot,
as she trails behind her mother
and looks pleadingly at her father.

(2)

Nectarine Tears

Dressed up and ready to leave
they coax and cajole her,
but she clings to them,
and clings closer,
as they move towards the cars

and grandpa gently seizes her
and clowns and cajoles
to gain her favour,
while mom speeds away,
concealing a pearly tear,
and dad, waving byes,
follows soon after.

Reluctantly the toddler—
a bagful of sighs and cries—
raises her hand to dad's gesture,
tears hanging from her lids
like dew, like nectar.

(3)
Joy Pervades

But soon the tears dry up,
the mood becomes brighter,
the voice mellows into singsong
and smiles take over.
'Dadco,' she beckons her grandpa,
pointing at the garden outside
with her index finger,
and quickly he leads her outdoors,
brimming with joy and cheer.

(4)
Child's Play

She finds red seeds on the ground.
'Dadco,' what is this here?
'Seeds from the magnolia cone,'
he points to the tree above,
'over there,'
and shakes the magnolia tree
as the red pearls rain down and scatter
and she jumps in glee

and picks them up, one after another,
carefully with her thumb and forefinger
to deliver them into a yellow saucer.

Now they walk towards the swing
and grandpa hoists her in
and gives air
while she laughs and shouts in dizzying joy
as the swing oscillates higher and faster.

Soon it is time for a new game—
to scoop some clay
from a flower-bed yonder,
make a mound and design a shape—
a dog, a cat, a hare—
now leave an imprint of her palms
and now unravel it and walk away
without thought or care.

And now to pick the watering hose
open the faucet, and sprinkle water—
on the grass, the shrub, the flower,
a splash here, a splash there,
soaking their clothes,
laughing their sides out,
jumping in the air.
'Oh what a mess you make,
how wet and dirty!' pleads grandfather.
'Durty , me!',
her guttural sends them in a twitter.
'Oh dear!' exclaims grandfather,
'Oh dear!' joins grandmother.

(5)

Building Castles

'You will catch a cold, little imp,'
grandfather seizes the hose from her

but she hates to let go the sprinkler
and resorts to her favourite refrain,
'Mom, Mom, where, o where?
Dad, Dad, I want you near.'

'Your Mom will return soon dear,
she will kiss your hands here,
she will fondle your little feet there;
your Dad too will join, for sure,
he will hug you tight, left and right,
and hurl you high, up in the air.'

Her face lights up, she runs to her room,
to retrieve cassettes from somewhere,
'Spot', 'Tubby', 'Tigger',
won't grandpa play them for her,
as a little favour to a grand daughter?

'No, no more TV, dear.
It is time for the building blocks,
songs to sing, stories to savour.'

They read stories one after another,
and she pantomimes
as the protagonist,
and the central character.

They move on to build a castle,
mounting one block over another,
red, green, yellow and blue—
colours she identifies with a flair—
as she hauls herself up on a chair
to raise the castle higher and higher.
But no sooner
the castle goes up in the air
and they clap and admire
than a sudden shove from her hand
and down it comes in a splutter

to her who-did-it look
and ripples of loud laughter.

(6)
The Lunch Hour

Looking at the road
through the window pane
she contemplates lunch with her mother,
and her face lights up with joy
as she spies the car and her mother
and runs to open the door for her.
'Nausheen!', cries mother in a twitter.
'Change mama, change,' holding her finger,
she guides her mother to the dresser.
'Change mama, change,' in a refrain.
Mama picks a dress from the hangar.
'No, no,' she stomps her feet
her face changing from joy to fear
and points to the drawer
where mother stows dresses for home wear!
'I can not change now into a home dress,
I have to go back to work, my dear,
after I share the lunch with you.
Now be a good girl and persevere
and I will return at five, for sure.'
But while they eat a hasty lunch,
Nausheen is readying herself
for another tearful farewell.

(7)
The Heady Mix

'Fries,' she blurts, 'fries, Nanz,'
throwing her grandma into a flutter
who peals and pears a faultless tuber,
fries it on a gentle fire
and serves it soon after.

'Soce, Nanz, soce please.'
Sauce is served in a saucer
in which she
dips each potato finger
before she guides it past her incisor.
'Coke, Dadco, coke pleese,'
and he pours coke into her sipper.
'(S)traw, Nanz, (s)traw,'
impatience catching up with her
as Nanz jumps to pull out a straw
and hands it over
and she sips quietly, contentedly,
the bubbles rising up one after another .

As Grandpa switches on the brewer,
and the coffee flavour fills the air
Nausheen, pushing her coke away,
demands her coffee share!
Full with coke and other fare
she rolls on the silken carpet
here, there and all over,
before balmy sleep takes over.

(8)

Bathing ritual

Before long the evening draws near;
mom returns
and Nausheen, sensing her arrival,
wakes up, and rushes to her
and Dad arrives soon after.
It is time for the family to gather
and watch Nausheen in her shower
as Dad fills the bathtub with water
while Mom helps to undress her.

Oh where, oh where
are all her friends—

the duck, the frog, the piglet, the hare?
Come gather them all
and dash them into the tub of water
to share the bath with her,
to splash and croak and squeak and sing
and fill the house with mirthful laughter.

They towel her and dress her up
and brush her hair,
and comb them gently
to untangle her lovely curls,
and it all makes her wonder
how a shower has so transformed her.

(9)

Late Vigil

Night draws close
and dinner is over
and they all change into night wear.
Mom moves into her bed,
and Nausheen pleads with her
to read her the fairy tales
from one cover to another.
Mom yawns and pulls up the comforter.
'More, mama more,' she urges her.
Mother sends her to her father
and she receives her father-share
of bed-time stories and anecdotes,
till he yawns a 'Goodnight dear.'

Dad switches off the lights
and she rolls around in discomfiture,
supine and prone, here, there,
and softly he sings,
'Good night, Nausheen,
good night, mother,

good night, Dadco- Nanz,
good night, all of us here,'
and reluctantly she too joins
and sighs a good night whisper.

Dadco-Nanz,—favourite names for grandpa and grandma.

Playmates—1

When father and daughter play together
it is hard to say who is the younger.

Laughing and gesticulating,
outdoing each other,
now frivolous, now in earnest,
they run about and roll together.

When she tumbles down and hurts herself
Dad manages to tumble down as well
and pretends to get hurt like her
but she loses no time
to gather his head in her hands,
to lend all manner of tender care.

And soon it is for her to feign
and show her bruised finger
but just when he starts to comfort her
she gives a smile
and snaps shut her finger,
to signal that the game is over.

Playmates—2

Now she shifts to her books,
shuffling them from cover to cover,
to pause at that familiar picture
of a father, relating fairy tales
to his daughter.
She draws her dad near
pointing at the picture,
urging him to read the story to her.

He reads aloud,
letter by letter,
to his all-attentive daughter.
Approvingly, she shakes her head
and moves her little finger
from one line to another.
Mimicking father,
she joins with her chatter—
new expressions, new words—
that so much fascinate her.
'Yes, my dear,' applauds father
as mother joins soon after
and they move indefatigably together
from one story to another
till the evening draws near
and it is time for supper.

The Helpmate—1

Mother need not worry any more,
about this, that and another chore,
for Nausheen, her little daughter,
lends her a helping hand
in all tasks, whatever.

Up before dawn
she ushers herself into the day's tasks
following her mother and father
from the bedroom to the dresser,
from the kitchen to the washer,
lending a little help here,
lending a little help there.

She wears her dress by herself
and bins her own diaper,
gathers cups from the holder,
activating a switch here,
pushing a button there,
be it the microwave or the dishwasher.
She mops the tables with a duster
leaving them clean like a mirror,
and helps fix a painting on the wall,
driving the nail with a baby hammer!

She does all this and more,
every time a new chore,
picking books from the store,
reading them tales of yore,
laying great emphasis here,
making light of a page there,
lending so many expressions,
forcing untold ejaculations,
in her own vocabulary and grammar.

The Helpmate—2

Yet the very next moment
unnoticed by either mother or father
she tears a page from her notebook
and allows the pieces to scatter
and soon pleads with her mother
to piece them together,
for some naughty one, not she,
did mutilate and litter,
this page, so precious to her.

Mother artfully glues them together
and hands them over to her
and daughter gives a hurrah
and a swagger:
isn't mom a real master!

And no sooner does mother
get busy with household chores
than the little one manages again
to artfully tear the glued page
and dash again after her.
Mother, mother, some trickster
has once again caused this disaster,
could she please fix it for her?
Her expressions so earnest,
so natural, so sincere,
that mother joins the make-believe
that it is some mischief monger,
some invisible dodger,
who tore the note book
and not her daughter,
the eternal helper.

More at Two

Speaking on that important matter
of speech and demeanour
on her birthday last week,
our little daughter is trying fast
to catch up with the letter S
which seems often to escape her;
so spoon becomes 'poon'
and spider 'pider';
or the letter K
which she often mispronounces,
to make key 'she' ,
and kipper 'shipper'.

And when she balances precariously
on the edge of the sofa,
and we rush to stop an imminent fall
she is only trying, desperately,
to draw us away
from the family conversation
so she can have our full attention.

And what looks like clowning,
mimicking and aping
is not to poke fun
but to be like us—
a desire to imbibe and replicate
our gestures, expressions, mannerisms,
to be true to the genes
she inherits from us.

And that could be why
she gets so often into our shoes
and wants to don our dress.

And when she worms her way
from under my apron
to feel close to me
and pops her head out from the neck
like a kangaroo
and thrusts her hands through my sleeves
to wave a halloo
and tickles me at the navel
and laughs the boisterous laughter
of her father,
it speaks of her amour,
and her adoration,
for both of us.

Meeting You after a Year

Often did I eagerly inquire
on the phone, e-mail and elsewhere
how you grew from day to day
as you journey through your third year—
the way you look
the manner you walk
the content of your talk
the questions you ask
the games you play
the stories you relish
your sleep rhythm
your dream sequence
your expressions;

and often have I been informed
of your ready wit
your keen eye
your frolicking ways
your clever ploys
your adoring gestures
your winsome overtures
your crystalline mind
your charming innocence
your sapience.

But hardly had I realised
till I met you again
after a full year
that, like Krishna,
you are beyond description
and all that I had conceived
was just a figment of imagination.

One had to meet with you
and interact with you in so many ways
to discover a little of your Maya—
that divine indulgence
that robbed the hearts of Gokul's milkmaids
whose butter you stole,
and stirred the soul of Gopis
bathing in the Jamuna
whose clothes you teasingly concealed,
and yet pined to dance in ecstasy
in your company.

The sage of Naperville,
where you were born,
has graduated
to the stormy petrel of San Francisco,
where you are growing up;
and truly the Lord incarnates in you
and truly Aditya, my grandchild,
you are That.

Maya—the illusory phenomena.
Gopis—belles.

The Great Mimic

She wants to do it all by herself
like her older sister—
change her underwear,
wear her own diaper
comb her own hair,
dress herself,
and
turn the pages of the book
to engage the same picture
that so much interests her sister.

In the mall
she looks for a footwear
exactly the same as her sister,
and at the bookshop
she makes a mess,
shuffling through the racks
to find a copy of the same title
we bought last week for her sister.

She is into everything
her Didi is—
when Didi makes a remark
she parrots her,
when Didi wants an ice cream
she wants it too,
the same size, the same vintage,
and the same French toast,
and the same cereal—
and wherever Didi moves
she follows suit.

She likes to sit like her,
speak like her,
pose like her,
dance like her,
sing like her,
and cry like her
and do whatever
does her sister.

Sibling Rivalry

Little Shereen,
irrepressible child of delight,
the family's cynosure,
how impatient you are
always to be in the fore.

You wake up ahead of others
to seize command,
to get amongst your toys
and possess them instantly,
even those of your doting Didi.

You want Didi to share
all her toys and dolls,
her pencils and crayons,
her stickers and sundry possessions.
Yet, when it comes to sharing yours
you guard them ever so jealously,
for now the same sister,
whom you mimic and adore,
feels like an arch rival
and an icon no more!

But while she surrenders to you
you lose no time in grabbing
what is her due,
pull her away from mother's lap
and comfortably settle yourself there.
Crestfallen, as she moves to a corner
to turn the pages of her book,
you dash there like a tiger
and snatch the book away from her.

Now you covet her long hair
and keep asking your mother
why yours doesn't grow quicker
so you could make a pony tail like her;
and now you are waiting for a chance
to run after her
and pull at her silky golden hair.
In the process if you sustain a fall
and bump your head or hurt your butt
how nonchalantly
you attribute it to your doting sister!

In the dinning place
you extricate yourself
from your high chair
and land on the breakfast table
to partake of the adult fare
and to rub shoulders with your sister!

Yet we know, in truth
it is not rivalry
but your adoration for her,
it is not envy
but your idolatry for your sister,
like a zealous devotee
wanting to rival her own deity!

At Two and a Half

At two and a half
there is so much to know
and such a lot to do.

It is time to wake up early
and join you,
my mom and dad,
in the morning ablutions,
prayers and salutations.

When I spoke my 'blabber'
only three months back
I was speaking my mind
that you could not decipher
so I decided to pick words,
inflections and intonations,
to convey meanings
beyond mere symbols—
more words everyday
in my fast growing vocabulary.

Now I can speak
three-word sentences
and sometimes four
and know where to place
the conjunction 'and'
or the preposition 'near'
and I am fast catching up
with the verb 'kiss'
and the adjectives 'pretty' and 'dear'.

I communicate freely
through words of languages three,

English, Kashmiri and Hindi,
for I have learnt not to be
a linguistic chauvinist
but use words as my tools
to help me ask questions
and express my thoughts freely,
as free can be.

With a mind of my own
and time at my command
there is a day's schedule to draw,
and work to organise—
to play with the dolls;
riffle through the picture books;
and watch the TV,
to dance with the music
so natural to me;
to ply the bus,
fly the plane,
and run the train;
to seek the secrets
behind closed spaces—
closets, cabinets, stores
and the spaces under the stairs—
for I know no fear
nor doth darkness scare me.

Then to go out into the lawn
to speak to the flowers
and unfold my plan;
gather pebbles, pods and seeds;
catch a snail
and chase a butterfly;
look into the pool,
to ponder on my reflection.

And to return again to my room
to restore order
and repair my subjects—
the toys, the techno and teddy bear,
the cub, the pup and the hare—
one by one into their lair.

And then to bed with mother
singing nursery rhymes together
till I yawn
and my eyelids flutter
and quietly close
for night's repose,
much against my wishes,
for no amount of activity
ever tires me
and the word 'idle' is nowhere
in my dictionary.

Aditya on His First Visit to India

Why is everyone honking their cars
and the crowds scampering everywhere?

Why no walkways for pedestrians,
can they escape being run over?

Why are toys so flimsy and fragile here
that they break in spite of all the care?

Why are the beds so hard here
that they make you stiff all over?

Why do cows loiter in the streets,
their dung strewn everywhere?

Why such filth on the roads
and no garbage-cans anywhere?

Why is everyone eager to hug you here
even when being a total stranger?

Why does the scooter-driver wear a helmet
but not the pillion-rider?

Why do the kids play in the streets
with feet bare, and rags to wear?

Why are stones strewn everywhere
even as they are worshipped in the temples here?

The Prophet

He came, he mesmerised, he conquered,
and when he left
he carried our captive hearts with him.

He gave us a lot to talk about,
to think about, to write about,
transforming our lives for ever
with his unselfish love,
his childish innocence,
his creative intelligence.

When he was here with us
he was many things at many times
and all things at the same time—
the gardener
watering the garden of life,
the fire-fighter
dousing the flames of hatred,
the engineer
building bridges of reconciliation,
the surgeon
suturing ruptured relations,
the nurse
tending to bruised souls
and the divine flute player
serenading the gopis.

Like a missionary he arrived
teaching the gospel of love,
and like a prophet he left us
aspiring for the truth in life.

Gopis—belles with whom lord Krishna danced.

How We Miss Him–1

Pray do not speak of him to me,
of what he did and what he said—
his winning ways, his easy charm
his sharp eye, his ready wit,
his innocent pleadings to me,
'excuse me, but I need you Nani,'
and his dialogues with mother,
'But Mama, didn't I tell you,
I can do it, remember?'.

Speaking about him,
when he is not here,
deepens the pangs of separation
in my heart.

Pray do not play the tape recorder,
I can not bear to hear his voice
without him being near,
and I miss those divine expressions,
their intensity, the urgency there.
His speech—so matter-of-fact,
so sharp, so clear—
sends a love-stab into my heart
and my passion afire,
to hold him in my loving clasp
when he is not here.

Pray do not show me the photo album,
and the rerun of the camcorder,
of our evening climb to the hill,
of his careful steps along the ridge
on way to the temple,
of his salutations to Siva there

and a climb on the back of the Nandi bull.
The memory of this all
bites my heart
and makes me feel so empty,
his being so far from me.

Pray leave me to my muse;
for, a view here, a sound there,
only sharpens my pining for him;
and a talk about him now and then
is but a far cry
from my wholesome vision
of the cosmic kid,
who captivates me
and resides in my heart for ever.

How We Miss Him–2

There are no words to describe
how we miss him
as he grows into our consciousness
from day to day.

We can not recall his face,
or we dare not,
for, the form diffuses,
the features recede,
the complexion fades,
the colours disappear.

But we are left with
a huge presence,
a bright halo,
a vast energy all round,
a movement that we perceive,
and a strong pull of love.

The Cosmic kid that he is,
how can he have a conceivable form,
when he permeates everywhere-
the earth, the sky and air—
when he is the divine radiance
in which we bask and revel?

The divine kid that he is,
he transcends our vision,
and, like a god, he grows
beyond time, space and matter.

SECTION SIX

THIRD YEAR AND AFTER

Every child comes with the message
that God is not yet discouraged of man.

(Rabindernath Tagore)

Happy 3rd Birthday

Can flowers,
with all their fragrances and colours,
say it all, my grandchild?

Can words,
can gestures,
or their admixtures?

Can all the gifts,
the kisses and hugs?

Can my nectarine eyes,
my murmuring heart?

Can the Hanumansque baring of my breast
where you are for ever ensconced?

Can the depth of the oceans
or the breadth of space
compare with the divine grace
of my adoration,
trying to find expression,
in so many ways.

Why Can't I Stay Home, Mother?

Am I not small any more,
that you call me Miss Grown Up
because I have a baby sister
though I am only a three year old ?

Why do I have to go to school
when my little sister is here,
and so much that I can do
while I am home with her—
work in the garden,
help my mother
and look after my baby sister.

Look how I can water the lawn,
prune the bushes,
cut the dead leaves away,
to let the plants grow and flower.

And many other ways
I can help mother-
transfer clothes
from the washer to the dryer,
get on top the foot-stool
and wash the plates in the sink
and help with the dinner.

And take care of my little sister—
feed her on the bottle,
change her diaper,
rock her gently to sleep
and sing a song of cheer.

Yes, I like Miss Annie, my teacher,
and many friends out there
in the day-care,
but I like my home much more
and I adore my little sister.

She is a Big Girl

(1)

'What is that white stuff in the fields,
out there, mama?
Those white fluffy balls?'

That is cotton, my little one.

'It must taste good, eh?
Can we eat some, mama?'

We do not eat cotton, my dear,
we spin thread out of it,
from the thread we weave cloth,
and from cloth we make garments—
a shirt, a frock, a sock
like the one you are wearing now.

'Cotton is good mama?'

Yes, it is,
and what do we make out of cotton,
my darling?

'We make cotton candy, mama!'

(2)

'She is clawing at my nose,
my little sister, Shereen, is.'

You are nosing on to her, my dear,
she is only trying to fondle it,
your little sister, Shereen, is.
'She is pulling at my hair,
my little sister Shereen is.'

She is not pulling your hair,
only trying to comb it with her finger,
for she likes your silky hair—
the curls at the ends,
the golden-brown colour.

‘Oh, my little Shereen,
my lovely little sister.
I like her soft little hands,
I like her pink little feet.
Can I hold them, mother?
Can I kiss my little sister?’

Take care,
not to hurt her,
and when you kiss her
don’t you smother your little sister.

‘I just want to play with her,
not to hurt her.
I am big enough, mama,
and she is my little sister.’

How big are you,
my darling Nausheen?

‘Here look at my index finger—
one.
and the middle finger—
two
and the ring finger—
three.
Am I not big enough, mama?’

You are,
my wonderful daughter,
a big, big girl, for sure.

On Going to Bed—1

Aditya refuses to go to bed;
does not want to miss stuff
left off after daylong exertions
in home and in day-care.

As the central character
he flits
between his picture books,
toys and machines,
and holds the world in his palm,
waiting for his mother
to turn the pages
as he scans them one after another.

When forced to his bedroom
he wants more and more
of Mom's childhood tales,
of Dad's boyhood exploits,
of what they were like
and what they did
when they were his age.

To beguile him into sleep
Mom invokes the doctor,
the detective and the police,
but that only prompts him
into the hyperactive mode;
for, how can he go to bed
until all his toys and all his subjects—
the bunnies and pups,
the horses and bears,
and all the creatures,

and those in the pictures—
have gone to sleep.

And having commanded
everyone to sleep
he climbs to his bed,
throws himself reluctantly,
turning on the sides,
on his back and on the tummy,
now rolling himself into a ball
to attain the foetal stance,
now arching backwards like a gymnast,
now gliding, now rolling
almost falling off in the process!

And he is heard mumbling:
'Mom said "Good night",
but I can't sleep
because the moon is too bright.
Dad said "Sleep tight",
but I can't sleep
because of the starlight.
Why can't I play?
Why can't it still be day?'

On Going to Bed—2

Now go to sleep, my restless lad,
don't roll in the bed everywhere.

'But lend me your ear Mom,
some funny sounds do I hear—
a shuffle here, a whisper there!'

Oh it is the cows outside,
foraging for food on the slopes there—
for the grass,
dew-sprinkled and tender.
Let me go out and shove them away,
across the gorge, to the hill yonder?

'Why do you have to go out mother,
it is dark out there,
I can send them an e-mail
that will reach them much faster.'

You make me laugh my little one
and keep me awake all the night
with those funny ideas;
you better sleep in your own room,
now that you are three and a half,
and going to be four,
don't you, my cynosure?

'Not three and a half yet,
only just about,
and when I will be four
I will sleep in my own room
and then you will miss me,
for sure.'

Love is There

On his return from school,
seized with an impulse one day,
mother kissed him on the cheeks—
a loud, lingering, liquid kiss—
a mother's effusive outpouring.

The kid submitted with abandon
but no longer than she let him go
he wiped his cheeks,
with the back of his hand.

Why did he erase her loving kiss,
asked mother, pretending hurt.

'I only wiped the wet,
the kiss is still there,
and your love too,
my darling mother.'

The Right Intonation

He came out of his school,
eyes red and swollen,
tears flowing down.

'Are you crying, my bunny baby,
did you hurt yourself?'
mother asked with some trepidation.

'No mom,
I am neither hurt nor crying,
it is my eyes that are a weeping
and my nose that is a sneezing;
it is my eyes that are a watering
and the nose that is a running.
The teacher said it was nothing
but an allergic reaction
that causes the itch and the irritation.'

'Oh my little one, I am so sorry,
it should pass off quickly,'
mother said matter-of-factly.

'Do you really mean it?'

'Mean what, my darling?'

'That you are sorry.'

'Yes, of course,
but how can you doubt it?'

'Because the way you said it;
can you say it again, mama,
can you say it with feeling?'

'Oh, my little, little one,
my clever one,
my darling son;
I really, really mean it,
from my own heart here;
can't you feel it?'
she said with hugs
and slobbering kisses.

Broken Heart and a Rainbow Flower

'You know, mom,
I felt so sad in school
confined to the room
with two-year olds,
looking like a fool,
while my friends played outdoors
and had a swim in the pool.'

'It breaks my heart for you,
my little one,
but you know,
the teachers were told
not to let you out
because of this allergy.'

'Why can't I go out, dear mother;
why force me inside like a prisoner
when my friends are having a free run
out in the open, everywhere?'

'Because of the pollen dust
that is blown by the breeze;
it hurts your eyes
and makes you sneeze.
Is that not what the doctor said?'

'But pollen is not dust,
only baby eggs,
that the butterflies carry
on their legs
to deposit in the womb of another flower,
so they grow into seeds,
powered by the sun and the shower.

That is what you taught me, mom,
when I was small,
and that is why I love pollen,
and its gorgeous yellow colour.'

'Yes, pollen is lovely
but it causes your eyes to water
and your nose to run and sneeze;
but, soon the breeze will stop
and the pollen count drop
and you can go out again
and run and hop,
and watch the flowers
and the colours.'

'You know, mom,
I like yellow the best,
the yellow of the pollen dust,
and I like the yellow lotus.'

'Now don't be funny, my little bunny,
whoever heard of a yellow lotus,
green sky, red forest
or a violet sea?'

'At sunset, mother,
when you look at the sky
with the clouds there,
you see it all—
colours merging into each other
like a huge rainbow flower.'

Bravado

One evening
mother and son sat together
reading stories
of goblins, witches and the monsters.
On a sudden impulse
the kid challenged mother
to impersonate a monster.

Mother sportingly took the banter,
she growled and roared
with frightful expressions:
'Ha! Ha! Hi! Hi!
Ha! Ha! Hi! Hi!
I am a monster,
I go after little kids
wherever they be.
I seek them from their warm beds,
snatch them forcibly,
muzzle their mouths,
and run away
before they can shout for help.

'I hide them in deep labyrinths
beyond the reach of their loved ones;
I whirl them around
and hurl them up;
I toss them struggling
into ice cold water.
And when ravenously hungry
I swallow them at my leisure.
Ha Ha, Hi Hi,

I am a monster,
I am a monster for real!'

The kid froze with fright,
his face pale,
his eyes on the monster
and soon he retched
and threw up in terror.

'Oh my little one,
how pale you look,
how frightened;
but you know
I am only pretending,
I am not a real monster.'

'But mom,
I am not frightened,
I look pale because of the dim light
and I threw up
because I had eaten a big dinner
and filled myself up to here.'

'Then, should I pretend again
if only for fun,
my child of valour?'

'No, never,
I do not like you as a monster;
you better be what you are,
and what I love you to be—
my dear, my loving mother.'

So Many Names

You call me Aditya now
and now Krishna,
Govinda now, and now Gopala.
How many names do I have?
Can I be so many together
or am I now one
and now the other?

Can one be two, three or many,
tell me grandma,
can so many be one?

When you tell me
that Krishna has always been there
and Aditya is around
four years altogether,
how can we reconcile
one with the other?

'They are all your names,
because you are so real,
yet special, like Krishna,
who has so many names—
each name for an attribute.

'That is how he is able
to make a path in Jamuna
by the mere touch of his feet;
kill Kalia, the demon serpent,
even when he is just a child;
subdue a rogue elephant
let loose by his uncle on him;
lift Govardhan on his little finger

and save Brindhaban from deluge;
win the war of Mahabharata
for his cousins, the Pandava's;
and play the flute
to entrance the gopis.

'That is how he has the power
to control the wind and the waves,
lend colour to the flower,
song to the bird,
contour to the hill.

'That is how you, my little one,
are able to juggle with the numbers,
to read, write and sign a letter
even though you are just four.

'And that is how one can be many,
and many can be you,
like your names and attributes,
my little Aditya,
my Krishna,
my Govinda.'

Govinda, Gopala—other names of lord Krishna, of Mahabharta.
Jamuna—a north Indian river.
Govardhan—a mountain in Brindhaban (near Mathura).

Shereen Postures on Didi's Birthday

On Didi's birthday
Shereen declared,
'I am older now, like Didi,
like her I go to school,
I can sing like her,
and dance like her,
and I can do all
she can do.'

'But you are not older,
you are only three
and I am six
and twice your age,'
Didi remonstrated

'But I AM older like you,
I too go to summer school,
and I can write like you
and draw like you
and read all the books you read,'
Shereen was emphatic.

'You can only scribble
and turn the pages
and pretend to read,
nor can you do the sums
and solve the puzzles
as I do.'

'I can,
how dare you tell me I can not,'
Shereen remonstrated.

'You can not,
for you are little,
when you grow up, may be you can,
understand my little sister?'

'No, I am older and that is it,'
Shereen, stamping her foot down,
shouted at her sister

Dad intervened,
'Shereen, you mean to say...'

'I am not mean, Dada,'
she blurted out

'I only mean....'
Dad fumbled.

'No I am not mean, I AM not.'

'Shereen, you certainly are not mean,
my darling;
I only want to explain
that you are her younger,
her lovely little sister
and you should listen to her.'

'But I too am grown up, am I not,
I go to the same school,
wear the same dress,
play the same games
and do the same things she does,
don't I Dada?'

'Yes, but you are three
and she is six,
you are only half her age.'

'But I am not half her height,
look, I almost reach her shoulder,
and soon I will catch up with her;
and I want all the dresses
and all the gifts you got for her,
understand my Dadoo?'

Didi—elder sister.
Dada—pet for Dad.
Dadoo—pet for Dad.

The Cosmic Kids Meet–1

It was a dream reunion—
Aditya, the kid from Fremont
visiting Dallas, with his parents,
to meet his sisters, Nausheen and Shereen,
masu Sidarth and *masi* Tingli.

What a time for reunion
soaked in the Yuletide spirit!

Soon after hugs and kisses
the kids flew into action—
exchanging gifts, flaunting toys,
making stories, inventing games,
dancing, singing,
having a run of the place,
bringing the ceiling upside down—
while the parents got time to relax,
catching up with missed videos,
events and anecdotes.

But can you lower guard
and trust the silence of the kids for long,
when there may be mischief along?
Two may be company
and three a crowd,
but with kids
two can be rivalry
and three a riot
when they are seeking their space,
each vouching for a special place?

Who is the first to have a bath,
who gets the first serving
of an omelette or French toast,

who gets into the car first
and a seat near the window?

When Nausheen gets the first preference
because she is the eldest,
'Oh why am I the smallest',
Shereen complains.
And when Shereen is in the fore
Nausheen feels it is unfair.
'Who was born first,
me or her?' she moans.
Then it is Aditya's turn,
to clamour for his own place,
to voice his concern
that it is not his fault
to be born between them,
and be neither here nor there
but in the middle somewhere!

They all want to be the youngest
and the oldest and the middle one,
all at the same time,
so there is no end to fun
as the fight for position
goes on and on.

And being Christmas time
and the new year knocking at the door
interesting things seem to happen
every day, every hour-
the Christmas tree coming alive,
the kids scouring their socks
on the merry Christmas morning
for the gifts Santa stuffed there,
the little angels singing nursery rhymes
to herald the happy new year.

Masu and masi—maternal uncle and aunt.

The Cosmic Kids Meet–2

But one day was special;
the kids were at their gamy best
and suddenly we heard an uproar
and rushed to the cosmic world of kids,
that no-holds-barred frontier.

Little Shereen was stamping her feet,
her voice like thunder,
and Aditya, hurt and in tears,
pleading with her,
while Nausheen trying to intervene
in a gently reprimanding tone,
'You should not be hurtful
to your brother from Fremont,
he is our guest you know.
Say sorry to him, Shereen,
my little sister.'

That was too much for Shereen,
for her prestige, her self esteem,
and enough provocation
for tears breaking down.

'Don't cry, little Shereen;
say sorry,
and you will be friends again,'
pleaded Tingli, her mother,
who soon materialised there.

'But I can not speak normally;
don't you see, I am crying,'
and what a thunderous laughter
it brought to the elders,

and the kids alike,
and changed the whole situation
from crying to laughter
as the kids soon made up
and huddled together.

Leku, Aditya's mom,
in a sudden surge of emotion,
took Shereen in her lap,
kissing her
for her impetuosity, her innocent charm,
while Aditya watched for some time
and his face started turning pale.

Wasn't mother lavishing all love
on little Shereen?
What would be left for him
if all of it went to her?

He rushed towards them
and, displacing Shereen,
jumping on his mother,
trying to cover her with himself,
as much as his small frame would allow,
to throw a shield around her.
But that would not deter little Shereen
who landed on both of them,
and not to be left behind,
Nausheen too jumped in the fray—
all the three scrambling for space,
making a human pyramid
on poor Leku's fragile frame!

The Cosmic Kids Meet–3

Another day, another scene—
the kids were watching a movie,
Aditya and Nausheen on the floor,
when Tingli appeared
wanting to see how the kids were doing.
Little Shereen stood up at once,
arms akimbo, hands on her hips
looking at her mother severely,
and pointing to the door,
'Out mama, out from here,
this is not for bigwigs,
but only for little kids!'

Mother had no option
except to quietly retire,
but soon the phone rang
a long distance call,
and Shereen rushed to pick the receiver.
'Hello,' it was a call from India,
grandparents Nani and Dadco,
wishing a happy new year.
Could Shereen sing a song for them
and switch on the speaker for all to hear?

Shereen readily obliged:
'Let us sing hello to Dadco,
Hello, hello, hello.
Let us sing hello to Nani
Hello, hello, hello.....'
And, soon Nausheen and Aditya joined
to sing their favourite song together,
'One, two, three

I love you and you love me,
we are a happy family....,'
and their parents joined the chorus
and grandparents too
on the other side of the line.

Could there have been a better finale
to this great get-together,
of the families,
joined across the land and seas
on the happy New Year?

SECTION SEVEN

BIRD SONGS FOR INFANTS

The way a crow shook down on me
the dust of snow from a hemlock tree
has given my heart a change of mood
and saved some part of a day I had rued.

(Robert Frost)

Chirrup Bulbul, Chirrup

Chirrup Bulbul, chirrup with joy;
your eggs have hatched in the garden bush
so close to the royal bedroom, hush, hush!
Pretty little birdies, soft and warm,
their beaks wide, their eyes shut!
The king has thrown his hands in the air
but the queen is happy and wants them there.

Let's break the news to the coloured sparrow,
the chattering mynah, the parrot, the crow;
the rabbit, the piglet, the cuddly bear,
the doggie, the duck, the cleft-lipped hare.
There is going to be a big commotion,
dance and song and celebration;
a party to be held, jobs to be done;
come, there is work for everyone.

Frail little birdies, pray, stay quiet,
stay in the nest, stay out of sight;
the eagles and hawks are flying around
and cats and snakes all abound.

Fledgling birdies, stay in peace,
Mama bulbul will soon be here,
with the best grubs that she can find,
and Papa bulbul not far behind.

Come Mama bulbul with a worm in your bill,
come Papa bulbul with a grub in your bill,
your little babes here growl with hunger,
their ceaseless clamour renting the air.

Come little children, come all together
and watch the grand spectacle here—
noisy little birdies with beaks so wide,
waiting to fill their gizzards tight,
with morsels of food, delicious and light
that their parents fetch in utter delight,
to quench their insatiable appetite.

Come, little doggie, stay around,
stop wagging your tail awhile,
and yelp aloud and yelp again
to keep the crafty cat away,
lest she stealthily strays here
and gobbles the birdies up for dinner.

Come, black crows, we need you all
to make a canopy in the sky
and keep circling the whole day
to keep the birds of prey at bay.

It has been a long, long day
of viands, vigils and vicissitudes;
and it's time to say goodbye to all,
to retire to our homes before nightfall.
The birdies need to rest for now,
to stop their feed and sleep awhile,
huddled together in their cosy nest
cuddled under mama's warm breast
on the royal bed, unseen and quiet
under the blanket of gentle night.

Crow Poornima

Crow, crow,
the crow of Battas,
my childhood crow,
my khichidi-eating crow!

Come, to our new house,
come, to the perch we built for you,
come, to rest and feed awhile,
come, to give us company,
come, you and your family.

Crow, crow,
my cawing crow;
my daring crow;
come, feast on the khichidi
we cooked for you;
remember it is Poornima today,
and your happy birthday?

Come to the roof above,
come to the eaves below,
come to the windowsill
come and eat your heart's fill.

Come, dear father crow,
come, dear mother crow,
come, little baby crows,
come, the whole family of crows.

Come, fresh from a dip in Gangabal,
with the sacred thread round your neck,
a saffron mark on your forehead,
your body smeared with brown clay;
come, flying across the valleys, pray!

Come, neighbouring crows,
come, distant crows,
come, cawing crows,
come, clever crows,
come, light-black crows,
come, jet-black crows,
come one, come all,
come, there is a windfall.

Come to my right,
and come to my left.
To the right is the green grapevine,
to the left the pomegranate and the pine;
come, it is time for bonhomie,
come, let us eat a full belly.

Come, dear crow,
the breeze is strong,
the stars bright,
the moon full and beautiful;
come, it is your birthday,
come today,
come every day.

Crow, crow,
my friendly crow,
my lucky crow;
come to my house,
come with your babes,
come with your spouse.

Crow Poornima—the birthday of crows celebrated on the full moon in the month of Magha (corresponding to Feb-March).
Batta—Kashmiri Pandit.
Khichidi- rice porridge.
Gangabal—a high altitude lake held sacred.
Scared Thread—A 3 or 6-layered cotton thread worn around the neck by Hindus (Brahmins) as a mark of being twice-born.
Brown clay—virgin clay from remote terrains used as detergent and antiseptic.
Saffron mark—a dot or flame shaped mark with saffron or vermilion in the middle of the forehead, generally sported by a Brahmin.

Clever Crow—1

There was once a crow,
a clever one was she;
it was a hot June day
and she was thirsty.

In search of drinking water
she flew high and low,
along the hills and dales,
in the happy valley.

Tired though, she didn't give up,
till she landed at her quarry,
away in a beautiful garden
where children played and made merry.

There she found a pot of water,
and she quickly flew near to see
but the water level was low,
as low as could be.

But she was a clever crow,
and she would find a way out;
she perched there in deep thought,
and think hard did she.

She flew around and soon found
little pebbles, stones and marbles
in the bed of a dry stream,
and there were aplenty!

With her long and strong beak
she picked them one by one,
tossing them into the pot,
as the level went up slowly.

Up and up, to the brim,
and within the reach of her beak,
and she drank beakfuls of water,
oh she drank it so heartily!

For she was a clever crow,
a clever one was she.

Clever Crow–2

There was another crow
and a clever one was she;
she hadn't eaten for long
and she felt quite hungry.

She looked around for food
in the jungles and the fields,
flying near and far
across the happy valley.

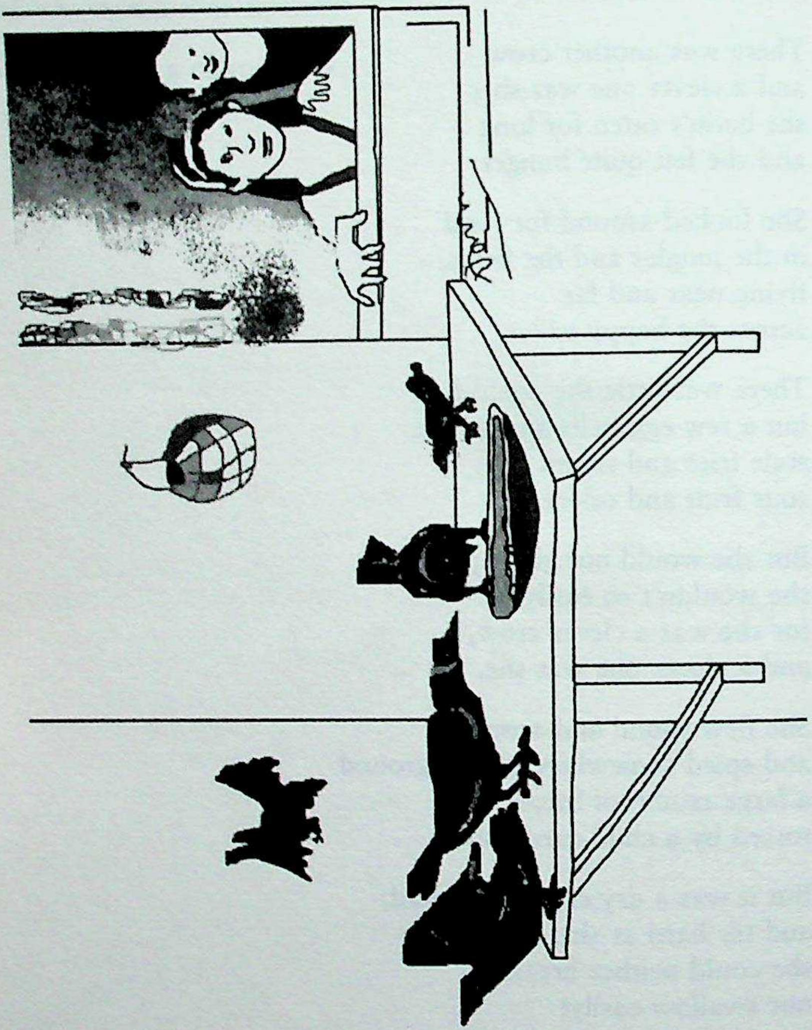
There was little she could find
but a few eggshells and bones,
stale fries and rotten rice,
sour fruit and celery.

But she would not give up,
she wouldn't so easily
for she was a clever crow,
and a clever one was she.

She flew round and around
and spied somewhere on the ground
a large crumb of bread
tossed by a child carelessly.

But it was a dry crumb of bread,
and try hard as she did
she could neither break it
nor swallow easily!

But she was a clever crow
and she would find a way out
so she paused to think
and think hard did she.



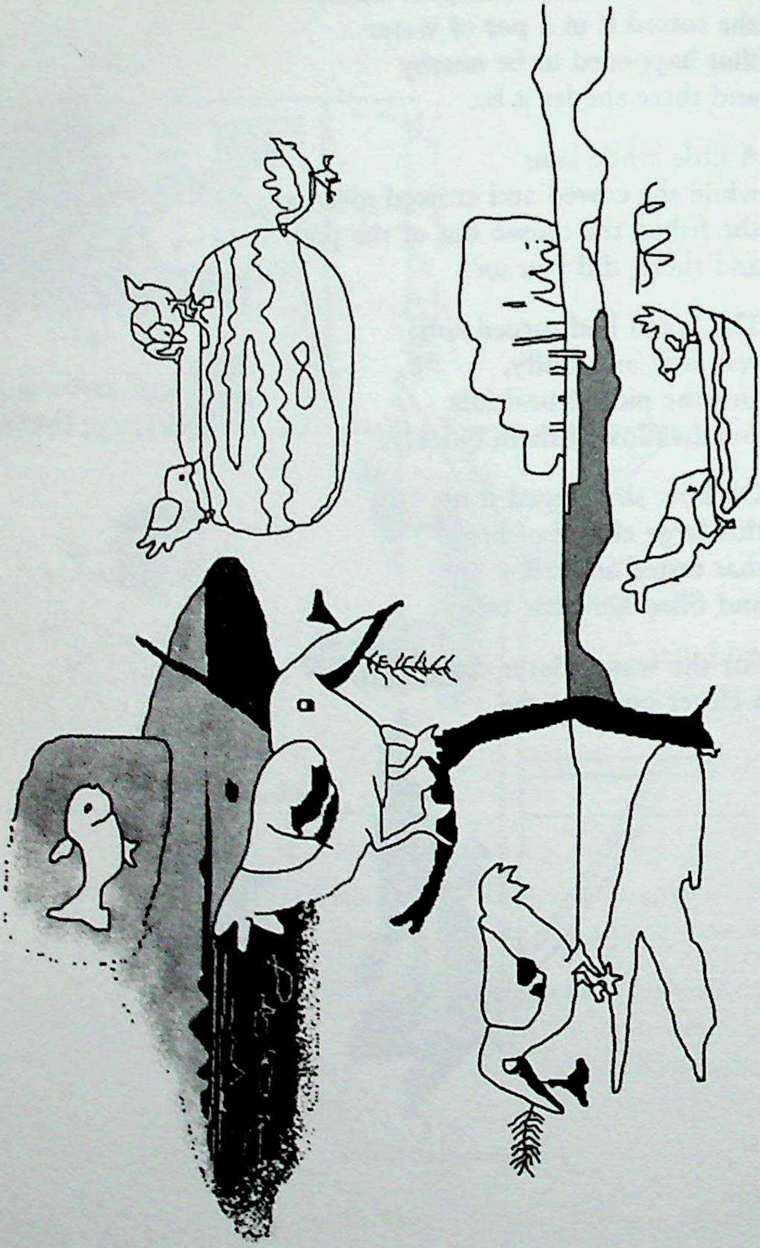
She picked the bread in her beak,
she tossed it in a pot of water
that happened to be nearby
and there she let it be.

A little while later
while she cawed and crowed merrily
she fished the crumb out of the pot
and there, did you see?

The bread had turned soft,
very soft and fluffy,
and she picked beakfuls
and swallowed them quickly.

Oh how she lapped it up,
this large chunk of bread
that tasted so well
and filled her little belly.

For she was a clever crow,
a clever one was she.



The Kingfisher's Dilemma

In his search for fish
he had to find water
for who has heard
of fish without water?

He flew over the hills
and he flew across the dales,
but neither a pond did he find,
nor a stream, nor river.

At last he saw a flight of birds
of a different feather altogether,
enjoying themselves in an orchard
of apples, cherries, and pear.

And there sure was a bucket,
a pitcher and a saucer,
all filled with sparkling water;
and sparrows, doves and bulbuls
impetuously claiming their turns
for a hearty bath and sips of water.

He watched them having their fill
of water games, of bird baths,
and beak-fuls of cool water,
as they went back and forth,
perching themselves on the trees,
shaking off droplets of water,
drying, preening and priming,
stretching their slender legs,
grooming their beautiful plumage
of grey and yellow, green and ochre.

He was getting impatient,
waiting for them to finish,
and soon he flew near
hovering for some time in the air,
peering down with his unblinking eyes,
at the bucket, the pitcher and the saucer.

Gathering courage
he swooped down to fish
and quickly picked some object
the size and shape of a minnow
that he tossed up in delight
to turn it around
and hold it back in his long bill
like a veteran catcher.

But something was amiss
and he tossed it up again,
to hold it from the other end,
and then again,
to hold it in the middle;
for, though it looked like one,
it did not feel like a fish anywhere,
nor did it writhe in his beak
like a live minnow,
that struggles to be free
and wants to return to water.

He let it drop back into water
and swooped down again,
again to pick it in his beak
and again through the tossing-up
and the holding-back-in-beak manoeuvre,
trying all positions and ends
with his delightful acrobatics.
But it was no fish, no prize catch,
but masquerading as a fish
just a mean little feather.

He flew back to the nearby tree,
ruminating for some time:
what was a feather, looking like a fish,
doing there in this saucer?

How content were the other birds,
how cheerful,
drinking, washing, bathing;
whistling without a care!

Was there any point
brooding over a failure;
why not go with the others
of different feathers
and enjoy some fun together?

He put aside the thought of fish
and readily joined the frolic;
he took a mighty dip in water
and a long thirst-quenching draught,
and then perched thoughtfully,
now on one tree, now on the other,
preening his beautiful wings
sharpening his long beak,
breaking into a sweet chatter.

All that glitters is not gold,
and all that looks like a little fish,
even to the sharp eyes of a kingfisher,
may not be fish
but a stray feather!

And there is no fun
brooding over failure
when, waiting round the corner,
there is a variety of rich fare
that life is bound to offer.

SECTION EIGHT

GRANDCHILDREN VISIT GRANDPARENTS IN INDIA

Grandparents and grandchildren
together they create a chain of love
linking the past with the future.
The chain may lengthen
but it will never part.

(Anonymous)

Waiting to be Picked

The orange season is in full swing;
the trees blossomed last spring.

It has been a patient wait
of nine long months
while the tiny fragrant flowers
stood the strong spring breeze,
transforming into little fruit buds
that grew imperceptibly
in the face of the blazing summer,
the dust storms and the torrential showers—
growing bigger and bigger
and mellower and mellower;
changing from green to yellow to brown,
and to the orange colour
that only oranges can boast of.

And having gone through the vicissitudes,
and weathered the crises,
and passed the water, wind and fire test,
the oranges are here,
waiting to be picked.

The oranges hang at the end of the tether
ready to sever from the umbilical cord
as the branches droop lower and lower
and the trees get heavier and heavier
aching with love's longing,
yet, waiting for deliverance!

But there is a grandmother here
pleading with the oranges
to tarry a while,

to stay put on the mother tree
rather than die with impatience
to adorn the breakfast table;
for, she is waiting for her grandchildren
to arrive from abroad,
and feast their eyes
on the grand spectacle of orange and green.
She desires her grandchildren
to pick them virgin from the tree,
to hold them in their little hands,
to feel their rotund fullness,
to play ball with them,
to smell their citrus flavour,
and to savour their juice
to the delight of all.

The oranges are in the pain of mellowness
ready to burst forth,
yet, holding on,
in deference to the wishes
of a doting grandmother!

The Final Hours

We do not speak about it;
the actions are enough
as we go through
the flurry of finishing touches
before we receive the divines
in a royal welcome.

We have travelled this long
and the journey is near end;
we can not be impatient now
for, the deities are nearly here,
tantalizing though they be,
as the last moments of waiting
become the longest.

The real pilgrimage is yet to begin—
the circumambulation before the *dharshan,*
the lighting of lamps,
the floral tribute and the incense,
and the endless dialogue
as we receive the audience.

We prepare ourselves
to make the best
of what time is available to us;
we will not agonize
about the turbulence of the departure
even before we have met.

For now we are in the twilight zone
and the sun, hiding behind the cliffs,
has already sent its long shafts of light
to illumine our lives.

Dharshan—audience with the deity.

I am Going to Miss You

Back to Dallas we go
and it's hard to say bye-bye.

No more flat roofs,
window beds will not be there,
nor the stone temple in the garden;
no climbing guava trees,
or wind chimes that sing in the breeze.

But most of all
we have to say bye to 'Indian'
and all the games we played.

Today is the day
I hope will go slow.

It feels just like yesterday
we stepped into your home
full of excitement and joy.

I love you and will miss you.
Sheena (Nausheen)

After You Left

(1)

Till you arrived
there was this intense desire
to meet with you
before the unknown caught with us;
a longing that had snowballed with time
since we were last together;
a desire to thaw
and deluge you with ourselves.

You gave us just two weeks
for a separation of as many years,
and what a melting away it was—
of time, of us—
as we hurriedly unravelled ourselves
during that intense ethereal existence
in the hypnotic trance of your presence.

That monsoon shower of your love
revived our drought-stricken selves;
we forgot who and what we were
in our total surrender
to your being near.

Then you left
and it was like a concussion
that jolted us
out of the amnesia of ourselves
and landed us
into an amnesia of your visit.

(2)

The stunning from that bolt of separation
has eased,
the amnesia that gripped us for quite some time
has melted away,
there is a rush of memories now
like a crowd trying to jostle
out of a crowded space.

But we are in no hurry,
we will let them out one by one
to amuse us for the rest of time,
till we meet again.

(3)

For quite some time we wondered
why the amnesia for your visit,
only to see the reason
as the fog started to evaporate.

Just as the sweet goes with the sour in life
so also the pain of your separation
took the pleasure of our reunion along
into the black hole of amnesia,
and all we were left with
was a vacuum,
even a negation of your visit.

Yet, that denial could not last long,
for time stood still,
forcing us to look back
for a second look,
of the time you spent with us.

It is that second look we are having
as we gingerly traverse
the forgotten territory again.

(4)

Your visit was short,
effervescent and intense,
so much packed with essence,
and there is so much you have left behind
that it will take us quite some time
to gather and take in.

Memories are hazy at present
and it is difficult to say
if we have woken up from a dream
or if we have started dreaming.
But a dreamy feeling is there,
all the same, all the time.

The lawns and the flowerbeds are deserted,
the guava tree,
under the shade of which the kids played
and spent most of their time,
is in the throes of separation.
Its boughs, that made a swing for them,
are aching for their touch;
the guavas refuse to mellow.

The birds come here askance
for their new little friends;
they refuse to have their bath,
they deny themselves the grain.

There is no speech here, only your echoes,
there are no tasks for us, save reflections,
there is no music, but your melody,
there are no smells, only your sweet fragrances.

(5)

What is this feeling
of that solid presence having dissolved

to blend with our very essence;
of the echo of baby-talk
bouncing off from the walls,
raining like pearls in munificence;
of your kaleidoscopic after-images
moving across our visual fields
in a grand celestial dance;
of your sweet smells and sounds
having for ever merged
with our existence?

There is you and you, everywhere,
and ours is a story of dissolution.

(6)

We treasure more than anything else
the vast treasure you left behind.
We dare not open or flaunt it at once
lest it dazzles us into arrogance
or catches an evil eye.

It is a treasure to treasure,
to last us till we meet again,
and till then,
to savour like old wine,
in small sips and slow draughts
that neither inebriates nor leaves sober
but lends that gentle intoxication
that fakirs wallow in.

(7)

It was a sacrilege
to make the beds you slept in,
to tidy up the room you lived in,
to give order to the disorder of departure,
for there we sought your living touch

that made us feel
you were still around.

Yet, weeks later,
when we spruced and tidied up,
what a blessing to find
little relics of your visit,
your left-over presence,
a treasure trove of objects—
a frock here, a sock there,
kids' scribbles,
drawings and crayon paintings,
pens, pencils, pebbles,
chewing gums and chocolates—
that are now our amulets and charms.

The miniature temple in the lawn
that the kids so assiduously built
with marbles, sand and stones
is now a daily pilgrimage.
There, we watch Siva's Tandava,
there we hear the flute of Krishna.

(8)

We rewind time and play it back,
trying to take in each moment
now magnified in detail,
of the magic world of kids—
their innocence, their forbearance
their will to conquer
their wit and humour,
a gesture here that steals your hearts,
a smile there that captures an eternity,
a remark now that makes you wonder,
a feat later that you could never believe,
an imagination running ahead of time,
a profuse outpouring of love divine.

We playback time
and play it back again,
we let it go in slow motion,
or freeze it when we will,
to have your fill.

(9)

We try to fill the void
talking all the way about you
as we go for long walks
on off-beat tracks,
in lonely woods,
and no one between you and us.

We fill it at other times
listening to the bird songs
and the nursery rhymes
that the children sang;
and still at other times,
composing a few lines
as a loving tribute to your visit,
so short, yet so intense.
Your memories have now become
the very current of our lives.

(10)*

Your voice, like music,
lingers on;
the sunshine of your smiles
keeps us warm;
your touch tugs at the heart
as it holds on;
time stands still
even as we move on;
we leave a little of us behind
and carry some of you with us—

little pieces of eternity—
to fill in the void,
till next time.

G.M. College of Education
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Dated. 29/3/2024

Tandava—The celestial dance of lord Siva.

*The 10th piece is by my daughter, Renuka(Tingli), echoing her sentiments in response to mine.

Enchanting World of Infants

A uniquely diversified poetic narrative, this anthology takes the reader along an adventurous journey into the enchanting world of infants.

Here mothers pour their heart out to the unborn infants:

I weave at my will,
every waking moment
and every sleeping wink
the pattern of time
into matter and space.

Here infants sing of their eternal bonds with their mothers:

Mother, there is a timelessness between you and me
that goes beyond the point you conceived me,
beyond singularity, beyond the infinity of time.

Here, grandparents go through austerities and take vows of penance for the gift of grandchildren:

Creation is no easy matter,
joy does not come from nowhere,
wishes are not granted without penance;
when the oceans were churned the nectar
came along with the poison....

Here the divine little angels take you along their milestones in a dance of life, while mothers and fathers nurture them with the labour of love and grandparents inundate them with the adoration that even gods envy.

Kundan Lal Chowdhury is a Medical graduate from Punjab University and postgraduate from Delhi University with a fellowship in Neurology from London.

Dr. Chowdhury has published papers on various medical topics in numerous national and international professional journals and is widely known for his pioneering work *Health Trauma of the Kashmiri Refugees* and is credited with drawing the attention of the world to this tragedy. He writes regularly on various subjects—medical and scientific, socio-cultural, and political. He made a mark in the literary field with the publication of his two highly acclaimed anthologies: *Of Gods, Men and Militants* and *A Thousand-Petalled Garland and Other Poems*.

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